

Samarin

When Kyrill Ivanovich Samarin was twelve, years before he would catch, among the scent of textbooks and cologne in a girl's satchel, the distinct odour of dynamite, he demanded that his uncle let him change his second name. He didn't want to be 'Ivanovich' any more. The Ivan from whom the patronymic came, his father, had died when he was two, soon after his mother, and he had lived with his uncle ever since. His uncle's name was Pavel; why couldn't he be called Kyrill Pavlovich? When his uncle told him he couldn't change it, that this was the way things were done, that dead fathers had rights and required respect, the boy went into angry silence, pressed his lips together and looked away, breathing loudly in and out through his nose. His uncle knew these signs. He would see them every few months, when one of the boy's friends let him down, or when he was told to put his reading lamp out and sleep, or when he tried to stop his uncle punishing a servant.

What the boy did next was not familiar. He looked at his guardian and grinned, and began to laugh. The effect of the boy's deep brown eyes looking up into his uncle's, together with that laugh, not a man's yet – the boy's voice hadn't broken – but not a child's either was unsettling. 'Uncle Pavel,' said the boy. 'Could you call me just "Samarin" from now on, until the time when I can choose my own names?'

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So the twelve-year-old came to be called, at home at least, by his family name alone, as if he were living in a barracks. The uncle was fond of his nephew. He spoiled him when he could, although Samarin was hard to spoil.

Samarin's uncle had no children of his own, and was so shy in the presence of women that it was difficult to tell whether he liked them or not. He had little rank to speak of, and a large fortune. He was an architect and builder, one of those charmed individuals whose practical usefulness transcends any amount of snobbery, corruption and stupidity in the powers on whose patronage they depend. As Samarin grew up, people in Raduga, the town on the Volga where he and his uncle lived, stopped thinking of him as an unfortunate orphan and began to refer to him as *schastlivchik*, the lucky one.

It didn't harm the good name of Samarin's uncle among the conservative gentry that he took no interest in politics. No circle of chattering liberals met at his town house, he didn't subscribe to St Petersburg periodicals, and he refused to join reform societies. Reformers would keep asking him to sign up, all the same. He hadn't always been aloof from causes. In the mad summer of 1874, long before Samarin was born, his uncle had been one of the students who went like missionaries among the peasants in the villages, urging them to rebellion. The peasants had no idea what the students were talking about, suspected they were being mocked, and asked them, with embarrassed whispers and some jostling, to leave. Samarin's uncle was fortunate to escape exile in Siberia. He never recovered his lost pride. Once a month he would compose a long letter to a woman he had met in those days, who now lived in Finland, and, just before posting it, he would burn it.

Samarin seemed to take after his uncle in politics, though not in his dealings with women. He went through school and

on to the local university, where he enrolled as an engineer, without joining any of the debating societies or discussion clubs or semi-underground Marxist circles populated by the radical students. Nor did he enjoy drill, or mix with the militant anti-semites who would loiter on the university steps, gawking at hooknosed, bloodsucking Jewish caricatures in pedlars' chap-books. He read widely – his uncle would buy him any book he wanted, in any language – went to dances and, in his late teens, took long summer trips to St Petersburg. When a friend asked him about luggage labels in German, French and English on his travelling trunk, he smiled and said that buying the labels was much cheaper than actually travelling abroad. He had a great many friends, or rather a great many students counted him as a friend, even though, had they stopped to think about it, most of them would have been able to count the hours they'd spent with him on the fingers of one hand. Women liked him because he danced well, didn't try to get drunk as quickly as possible when the means were to hand, and listened with sincere interest when they talked. He had a way of devoting attention absolutely to one woman, which not only pleased her during their conversation, but left her with the feeling afterwards that the time they'd spent – no matter how brief, and usually it was brief – was time offered to her from a precious store, time which could and should have been used by Samarin to continue a great task. The fact that nobody knew what this great task was only intensified the feeling. Besides, he dressed well, he stood to inherit a large estate, he was clever, and everything about him, his wit, his strength, even his looks – he was tall, a little gaunt, with thick collar-length brown hair and eyes that shifted between serene remoteness and a sudden sharp focus – suggested a man holding himself back from revealing his full self out of consideration for the less gifted around him.

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The voices which spoke of alternative Samarins never gained a patient hearing, not because they were thought to be motivated by envy, but because their slanders were deemed too obscure. They were received like the small paragraphs in newspapers reporting bizarre happenings in other small provincial towns similar to Raduga (though never in Raduga): they were read with interest, but not believed, let alone acted on. There was the story of how somebody had seen Samarin and his uncle walking together when the nephew was fifteen, and how it had been the nephew talking, gesturing as if explaining something, and the grey-haired uncle who was listening, silent, nodding, hands behind his back, almost respectful. In those days there was unrest in the countryside. Manor houses were being burned down by peasants angry at the compensation they still owed landowners for the privilege of being freed from serfdom forty years earlier. Samarin's uncle would be called on to supervise the reconstruction of the manor. He would take Samarin with him to visit the families of the burned-out gentry. What one witness said, and it was only his word against everyone else's, was that he had overheard uncle and nephew together after one such visit, to a family of the most minor nobility, who had lost everything, and that the two of them had been laughing about it. 'I heard the boy laugh first, and then the uncle joined in!' So the witness said.

In 1910, when he was 21, Samarin began spending time with Yekaterina Mikhailovna Orlova – Katya – a student in his class and the daughter of the rector of the university. They went for walks together; they talked in the corner at parties; they danced. One day in early spring, Katya's father ordered that the relationship end. Samarin had humiliated him, he said, during his annual address to final year students. When Orlov had talked about how fortunate the students were to be young

in an era when Russia was becoming a wealthy, enlightened democracy, Samarin had started to laugh. 'Not a snigger, or a chuckle,' said Orlov. 'A great roaring, bellowing laugh, like a savage beast in our academic groves.'

There was a holiday, and Orlov took his daughter to the country house of one of the university's patrons. Samarin found out that another student had arranged to meet Katya in the grounds of the house, to read her his poetry. Samarin persuaded the student that they should go together to the gates of the estate. Samarin warned him that Katya preferred men to be dressed in light-coloured clothes. Not long after the two men set out along the country road to the house, Samarin on a bicycle and the other on a horse, there was an unusual accident. The horse, normally docile, threw the poet, just as they were passing an area of deep, wet mud. The poet's white suit and beige English raincoat were covered in dirt, and he hurt his ankle. Samarin helped him onto his mount again and the poet turned back. Samarin offered to deliver the poems to the house before riding back to chaperone the poet safely home, and the poet agreed. They parted.

A mile short of the house, Samarin dismounted and walked on, wheeling the bicycle with one hand and holding the student's poems in the other. The verses were heavily influenced by the early work of Alexander Blok. The words 'moon', 'darkness', 'love' and 'blood' occurred with great frequency. After reading each one, Samarin stopped, tore the paper into eight neat squares, and dropped it in the ditch running along the side of the road. There was no wind and the paper spread out onto the surface of the meltwater run off the fields.

A watchman stood at the gate of the estate. One student looked much like another to him and, when Samarin introduced himself as the poet, it didn't occur to him that the young

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man might be lying. Samarin asked if he could meet Katya at the summer house by the pond and the watchman went to fetch her. Samarin wheeled his bicycle over to the summer house, a sagging, rotten structure being claimed by bright green moss, leaned his bicycle against a tree, and sat on a dry patch on the steps. He smoked a couple of cigarettes, watched a snail working round the toe of his boot and ran his hand through a clump of nettles till he was stung. The sun came out. Katya came through the wet, uncut grass, wearing a long brown coat and a broad-brimmed hat. She smiled when she saw it was Samarin. She bent down and pulled something out of the ground. When she sat down next to him she was holding a bunch of snowdrops. Samarin told her what had happened to the poet.

'I'm not supposed to see you,' said Katya.

'He gave me his poems,' said Samarin. 'I lost them. They weren't good. I brought something else to read to you. Would you like a cigarette?'

Katya shook her head. 'Are you writing poetry now?' she said.

'I didn't write this,' said Samarin, taking a folded pamphlet out of his inside jacket pocket. 'And it isn't poetry. I thought you'd be interested. I heard you intend to become a terrorist.'

Katya leaned forward and laughed. 'Kyrill Ivanovich! What stupid things you say.' She had perfectly regular little teeth. 'Joking all the time.'

'Terrorist. How does it sound? Because you need to get used to the word. "Terrorist."'

'Be serious! Be serious. When have I ever said a word about politics to you? You know better than anyone what a light-minded creature I am. Terror, I don't even like to say it. Unless you're talking about when we set off fireworks behind the ice fishermen at New Year. I've grown out of that. I'm ladylike

now. Fashion. Ask me about that! Do you like this coat? Papa bought it for me in Petersburg. It's pretty, isn't it? Enough. So.' Katya put the flowers down on the step between them. The stems were crushed where she had squeezed them in her fist. She folded her hands on her lap. 'No wonder Papa doesn't want you to see me if you're going to make fun of me. Well, read, go on.'

Samarin opened the pamphlet and began to read. He read for a long time. At first, Katya watched him with the kind of wonder that shows on people's faces when somebody says something out loud which corresponds to their most deeply buried thoughts; equally, it could have been what shows when one person makes a lewd proposition to another much earlier than expected in their courtship. After a while, however, Katya's blue eyes narrowed and the last patch of red faded from her smooth white face. She turned away from Samarin, took off her hat, brushed the gleaming blonde wisps from her forehead, took one of his cigarettes and began to smoke, hunched over her forearm.

"The nature of the true revolutionary has no place for any romanticism, any sentimentality, rapture or enthusiasm," read Samarin. "It has no place either for personal hatred or vengeance. The revolutionary passion, which in them becomes a habitual state of mind, must at every moment be combined with cold calculation. Always and everywhere they must be not what the promptings of their personal inclinations would have them be, but what the general interest of the revolution prescribes."

'Listen to this part, Katya: "When a comrade gets into trouble, the revolutionary, in deciding whether they should be rescued or not, must think not in terms of their personal feelings but only of the good of the revolutionary cause. Therefore

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they must balance, on the one hand, the usefulness of the comrade, and on the other, the amount of revolutionary energy that would necessarily be expended on their deliverance, and must settle for whichever is the weightier consideration.”

‘What does this strange document have to do with me?’ said Katya.

‘There’s a story of a plan to entrust you with a device, and a target.’

‘You should mind your own business,’ said Katya.

‘Don’t take it. I believe the intention is to spend you, and mark you down as a cheap loss.’

Katya gave a short, thin laugh. ‘Read more,’ she said.

Samarin read: “‘The revolutionary enters into the world of the state . . .”

Blowing out smoke and looking into the distance, Katya interrupted him. “‘The revolutionary enters into the world of the state, of class and of so-called culture, and lives in it only because he has faith in its speedy and total destruction,” she recited. “‘He is not a revolutionary if he feels pity for anything in this world. If he is able to, he must face the annihilation of a situation, of a relationship or of any person who is part of the world – everything and everyone must be equally odious to him. All the worse for him if he has family, friends and loved ones in this world; he is no revolutionary if he can stay his hand.”’ There. Now if you’re working for the police you can blow your whistle.’

‘I’m not working for the police,’ said Samarin. He folded the pamphlet and tapped it on his knee. ‘I could have lost this, with the poetry, couldn’t I? You memorised the Catechism of a Revolutionary. That was clever.’ He lowered his head a little and turned his mouth in a smile that failed to take. It came out as a grimace. Katya tossed her cigarette stub in the weeds

and leaned forward to catch the expression of doubt in his face, an expression she'd barely seen before. Samarin turned his head away slightly, Katya leaned further forward, Samarin twisted away, Katya twisted after him, Katya's breath was on Samarin's cheek for a moment, then he straightened up and looked around. Katya made a little sound at the back of her mouth, scorn and amusement and discovery all at once. She put a hand on his shoulder and he returned to her, looking into her eyes from almost no distance. It was so close that they could tell whether they were looking into the filaments of the other's iris, or into the black ports of the other's pupils, and wonder what significance either had.

'It's a curious thing,' said Katya, 'but I feel I'm looking at the true you for once.' Her voice was the voice of closeness, not a whisper but a lazy, effortless murmur, a cracked purr. With one finger Samarin traced the almost invisible down on her upper lip.

'Why is it so unbearable?' said Samarin.

'What?' said Katya.

'To look into the looking part of the one who's looking at you.'

'If you find it unbearable,' said Katya, 'don't bear it.'

'I won't,' said Samarin. He put his lips on hers. Their eyes closed and they put their arms around each other. Like a feint, their hands moved decorously across each other's backs the more eagerly they kissed. It was on the edge of violence, on the edge of teeth and blood, when they heard shouting in the distance and Katya pushed him away and they sat watching each other, breathing deeply and sullen, like opium eaters over laudanum they'd spilled squabbling.

'You have to leave,' said Katya. She nodded at the pamphlet. 'There. In there. Do you know Chapter 2, Item 21?'

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Samarin began leafing through it, but before he could find it, Katya began to recite it, pausing to gulp breaths: ““The sixth, and an important category is that of women. They should be divided into three main types: first, those frivolous, thoughtless and vapid women who we may use as we use the third and fourth categories of men; second, women who are ardent, gifted, and devoted, but do not belong to us because they have not yet achieved a real, passionless, and practical revolutionary understanding; these must be used like the men of the fifth category; and, finally there are the women who are with us completely, that is, who have been fully initiated and have accepted our programme in its entirety. We should regard these women as the most valuable of our treasures, whose assistance we cannot do without.””

It was months before Samarin saw Katya again. One morning he waited for her at the station. The university had a poor library and at intervals the authorities would send railway wagons, fitted out with bookshelves and desks, from Penza to give the students access to specialist titles. Samarin had all the books he needed at home but in the hottest days of May, when the railway library came, he was outside. Katya arrived, wearing a white dress and no hat and carrying a large, almost empty satchel. Her pale skin had burned and she was thinner and more anxious. She looked as if she had been sleeping badly. There was a hot wind and the poplars were hissing in their row beyond the station. Samarin called to Katya but she didn't turn round. She went into the library wagon.

Samarin sat on a bench on the station platform, watching the wagon. Something was burning in town, there was black smoke spreading over the roofs. The wind was so strong and hot there was bound to be a storm but the sky was clear, just the smoke spreading. Samarin sat on the bench and watched the students

come and go. The bench was in the shade of the station roof and sheltered from the wind but planks in the roof began to rattle. The students were moving through clouds of dust, their eyes closed, the women bunching their skirts with one hand and holding their hats with the other. Samarin could smell the smoke from the burning. The trees would rustle and then roar like a waterfall. When there were no students still waiting outside in the wind Samarin began counting the ones coming out. He could smell the burning. The clouds were coming. They were thick and they heaved while he watched them. No one else was left on the platform. The air stank of dust and smoke and ozone. It became very dark. The sky was a low roof. The last of the students came running out of the wagon. Samarin got up and called to him. The student ran round the wagon and across the rails and off towards the fields with his collar turned up. He turned round once without stopping and looked at Samarin. It was a message from the future. He'd seen something he didn't want to see again and all he wanted was to look Samarin in the face once more, to be able to say: 'I saw Samarin that day.'

Katya was the only one who hadn't come out. Samarin went over to the wagon. The reading room was empty and the desks were clear except for the copy of *Essentials of Steam* Katya had been using and some of her notes. She'd written a poem. 'She loved like suicides love the ground they fall towards,' she'd written,

It stops them, embraces them and ends their pain,
But she was falling over and over, jumping,
Hitting the ground, dying and falling through again.

Samarin closed the book, went to the door of the librarian's office and pressed his ear against the wood. The wagon

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was creaking in the wind so loudly that he couldn't hear. He couldn't tell if he could hear whispers on the other side of the door or if it was the wind and the roaring of the trees. A gust caught sand and straw and sent them pattering along the wagon chassis like a flood of rats flowing through the wheels. Samarin moved away from the door and heard a woman cry out. It came from outside. He ran out of the wagon into the dust and looked up and down the platform. There was no one. He could hear bells from a fire brigade in the town. He heard the woman cry out again, as if not from fear or pleasure or anger, just for the sake of making a sound, like a wolf or a raven. It was a long way away. A stone hit Samarin in the shoulder, and another on his head, and one on his cheek, drawing blood. He covered his head with his arms and ran under the platform roof. The sound of the wind was drowned out by a sound like cannonballs being poured onto the town from an inexhaustible bunker and the air turned white. The hailstorm lasted two minutes and when it ended the remnants of leaves hung from the trees like rags. The ground was ankle-deep in ice. Samarin saw the door of the wagon open and Katya climb down with a satchel on her back. Something heavy inside it weighed the satchel down. She looked up and saw him. Samarin called her name and she began to run away down the line. He moved after her. She slipped in the hail and fell and he came up to her. She was lying in the ice, half on her back, half on her side. Samarin knelt down and she looked up at him as if he'd come to her in the morning to wake her up after nights and days of sleep. She touched the cut on his cheek and slowly drew back her fingertip with the smudge of blood on. She was beginning to shiver with the cold. She asked Samarin: 'Where to?' Where to. Samarin took her hands and pulled her up out of the softening hail. She was dripping wet

and shivering. She took a few steps away from him, took off the satchel, looked inside it, held it against her chest and laughed. Samarin told her to give it to him. She went on laughing and ran away down the track. Samarin ran after her and caught her round the waist and she fell face forward. She was strong and she tried to cover the satchel with her body. Samarin wrestled with her, trying to turn her over, his shins wet in the ice, his knees against her thighs, his hands delving in under her to where she held the satchel against her belly. He smelled her hair and the wet cotton of her dress, and her soft strong middle twisted in his hands like a fish. He drove his right hand in between her legs and his left hand up to her breast and without crying out she let go of the satchel, squirmed round and tore at his hands with hers, their soft chill palms on his knuckles. He seized the satchel, rolled away from her and stood up.

‘Give it back,’ she said, lying still, looking at him.

Samarin opened the satchel. There was an explosive device in it. He took it out and threw the satchel to her. Katya began to shiver.

‘Better me than you,’ said Samarin.

‘Romantic,’ said Katya in a flat voice. ‘You’ve failed before you’ve begun.’

‘My throwing arm is stronger.’

‘You’ll throw it in the river. You’ll never use it.’

‘Why not?’ said Samarin, smiling, looking at the heavy package weighing down his hand. ‘It’s better than plans.’

Katya stood up, the melted ice leaving dark streaks down the crumpled front of her dress. Fragments of hail hung from the ends of her hair. She looked down, began to brush herself, then stopped and looked at Samarin. A change came across her face. It became warm, hungry and interested. She came up

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to Samarin, pressed her body against him, wrapped her arms round him and kissed him on the lips.

'Do you really like me so much?' she said.

'Yes,' he said, and leaned his mouth to hers. Katya grabbed the bomb from his distracted hand, hooked his ankle with her toe, snatched him off his footing, and ran away before he could catch her.

Two weeks later, she was arrested and charged with conspiring to commit an act of terrorism.

The Barber and the Berry Gatherer

In the middle of October nine years later, in that part of Siberia lying between Omsk and Krasnoyarsk, a tall, slender man wearing two coats and two pairs of trousers came walking from the north towards the railway. He followed the river, walking through the wild garlic and rowans and birches on the rocks above the rapids in the couple of miles before the bridge. His ears stuck out from coiling tails of dark hair reaching to his collar and his tongue slipped from the tangled beard to moisten his lips. He looked straight ahead and walked steadily, not stumbling, not like one who knew the way so much as one who had walked for months towards the white sun and was intending to walk onwards until killed or blocked. He ducked down and with his right hand touched a piece of string keeping his boots together. He kept his left forearm pressed tight against his chest.

He was a few hundred yards from the line when he heard the whistle of a locomotive. There was no wind and the trees shuddered from the sound to the horizon. His certainty and direction were sent awry and he looked around him with his mouth open, licking his lips. He squinted up at the bright grey sky and began to breathe deeply. The whistle went again and the man smiled and made a noise which could have been a part of a word or him having forgotten how to laugh and trying all the same.

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When the whistle sounded for the third time, closer, the man ran forward, round a bend in the river, and saw the bridge. His face closed and he ran to the water's edge. He squatted down and with his right hand scooped up water and splashed it over his face and drank some. He looked quickly at the bridge and behind him through the trees and let his left hand relax and pulled a package out from inside his coat. It was wrapped in a linen rag. He took a heavy stone and stuffed it into the cloth and tied two ends of the cloth tight in a knot. Stretching his arm back he hurled the package out and it disappeared into the water of the river. He put his hands into the water and washed them, took them out and shook them, rolled up the sleeves of his coats above the wrists and washed his hands again.

The locomotive came over the bridge, a dark green beast streaked with pale corrosion, like malachite, creeping across the thin span with a string of cattle wagons in tow. The whistle sounded down the gorge and the weight of the train bore down on rotting sleepers with the groan of wood and the scream of unlubricated iron and steel. It crawled on as if there were many ways to choose instead of one and flakes of soot and pieces of straw drifted through the air towards the river. One of the wagons was rocking from side to side and above the noise of the engine and the train there was a hacking sound as if someone was taking an axe to a plank.

The door of the wagon shot open and a man in army breeches and a white shirt was in the doorway, with his back to the outside, holding on with one hand and trying to catch the bridle of a horse with the other. The horse was rearing up and flailing at the man with its forelegs. There were more horses behind, their heads lunging madly towards the light. The man fell from the wagon as it rocked towards the river and toppled over the rail. He fell fifty metres into rocky shallows. His limbs worked

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as he fell, as if he was trying at the same time to fly, to land feet first, and to brace himself for the moment of impact. His eyes were open and so was his mouth but he did not scream. His cheeks were stretched back and he hit the water belly down. The water lifted white skirts high around him and when they came down again the man was not moving, beached on gravel, lapped by quiet eddies at the river's edge.

The horses, five of them, tumbled out of the wagon after the man. They were caught between the moving train and the low rusted guardrail of the bridge. One fell off the edge of the bridge immediately, landing on the edge of the river close to the fallen man with a crack on the water like a mine going off. The others fought for space on the bridge parapet. One stocky chestnut got dragged forward by a wagon, her harness caught by a projecting hook, and was hauled trotting and skipping and struggling against the mouth of the tunnel at the far end of the bridge, where her neck was broken.

The three surviving horses tried to shuffle to safety between the train and the rail. There was only space for them to move in single file, and barely that, but one of the three, a big skinny coal black horse, was trying to go in the opposite direction to the others. It reared up and its feet came down on the horse blocking its way, a bay. The black one got its balance back and reared again. The bay pushed forward and the black one ended up on top, its legs hung over the neck of the other.

While the bay and the black were locked together, like punch drunk boxers, the train must have given the third horse, a white stallion, a shove, or it had gone mad, because it charged the guard rail and dived head first over the edge into the river. It was roped together with the bay and the bay was snatched out from underneath the black horse and went down after. Bay and white flew down, so unlike Pegasus, graceless in the air,

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their limbs frozen, and smacked thunderously into the skin of water over river pebbles.

The survivor, the black horse, took a few paces back, stopped and cantered forward, against the motion of the train, back the way it had come. The space between the guard rail and the wagons widened as the horse moved on and it picked up speed as the last wagon swung across the bridge. The wagon disappeared into the tunnel and the horse was gone west at a gallop through the bracken and deep grass by the railside.

The man by the river stood still and listened until he could hear no sound from the train. He unbound his boots, took off both pairs of trousers and went out into the river to the place where he had thrown the package. The water came up to his thin white thighs. He searched for an hour, slowly, scanning the clear waters pace by pace, back and forwards. Twice he reached down and closed his hand round a pale stone.

He came out, sat down and put his boots and trousers back on. 'A fool then,' he said aloud.

He walked along the water's edge till he came to the base of the bridge. The bay was still alive, its head flailing in a shimmering cloud of mosquitoes, the rest of it paralysed with the water rushing round it, a great soft warm rock of flesh. The soldier who fell from the train and another of the horses were washed up on the shore. The soldier was dead. His breeches were of fine material and his boots were imported. There was nothing in his pockets. The man took off the boots and tried them on. He couldn't get his feet into them. He put the boots back on the corpse, turned the body over face down and took a knife out of his pocket. It was a single long, thin, rectangular piece of steel, sharpened to an edge along one side and with a strip of felt tied round the end for a handle. He went over to one of the dead horses, the white one, cut away a strip of

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hide from the leg, cut off a strip of flesh and put it in his mouth. He went over to the edge of the trees, picked a handful of sorrel leaves and squatted down, chewing the raw meat and leaves, looking round and watching the soldier. When he had finished he drank water from the river. He pressed his ear against the stanchion of the bridge and listened.

He went over to the soldier and picked up his right hand. He looked back upriver the way he had come, placed the soldier's wrist on a stone washed by a thin stream of water and cut off his hand, sawing through the ligaments and parting the joints by pressure rather than the sharpness of the blade. Blood darkened the stone, clouded out into the waters and swirled away into the current.

The man let the soldier's arm fall into the river, took the severed hand and ran into the woods. He walked for a mile away from the river and dug a hole with his hands through the mud and leafmould and earth. He buried the hand and covered it up. He returned to the river, cleaned his hands and began to climb the rocks up to the railway tunnel.

His toes with jagged broken toenails clawed out through the ends of the boots and when the way became steep he took the boots off and rammed them into the pockets of the outer coat. Thirty metres up there was a stanchion founded on the rock but the last ten metres up to it were steep, sheer almost, with no bushes to hold. The man stood on a ledge, breathing hard, the dying sun in the west hot on his back through the thick coat-cloth, and tracked the cracks in the rock with his eyes. He took the first handhold, stretching his left arm out straight up, and hauled his right foot up to a lip of rock. He crawled up limb by limb until the rock became smooth and the crack he had seen curving up to within reach of the stanchion turned out to be the shadow of a downfacing leaf of sandstone. He was pressed against

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the rock with his arms and legs splayed out like a newborn creature trying to suckle and embrace a stone mother vast beyond the scope of his senses. He had climbed too high to let go and fall. There was a vein of quartz slanting up towards the stanchion. The man felt the rock about to leave him. He made a sound, half grunt, half sob, and grabbed for the quartz with the fingernails of his right, then his left hand, getting half the purchase he needed from the translucent bulge to stop him falling, and the rest from his toenails. The long hard right big toenail scraped down the rock a couple of centimetres and slotted into a hidden crack. All the man's weight slid back onto the brittle plectrum for an instant before he used it to shove himself back up and, in the moment before the nail tore off, snatch the rusted iron spar of the bridge stanchion with one hand. He hung for several seconds, then got hold with the other hand and pulled himself up so that his feet were resting on the metal.

He climbed up the stanchion. It was easy, like a ladder. The pain beat with his pulse while he climbed. There was a hatchway at the top onto the walkway by the line. He went through and sat on the painted metal plates. The sun was about to sink behind the trees. He lay down along a smooth stretch of metal between rivets and closed his eyes.

He heard feet moving on the stone chips bedding the sleepers and turned his head towards the sound, not getting up. The clouds had cleared and the sky in the west was orange with the skyline torn by the black pines and the twin humps of blasted rock on either side of the cutting. The being coming was on foot and alone, about thirty metres down the line, a small, broad, dark form moving slowly in the twilight. The man stood up and spread his arms out. 'Brother!' he shouted. The approaching form stopped. 'Don't be afraid! I'm alone, without weapons!'

The other figure took a few steps closer.

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'Come on, let's not frighten each other.' The two men came near enough to see each other's faces. The man from the west had a hat and an overcoat and downy fuzz on his chin. He was carrying a carpet bag.

The man who had climbed up said: 'I've been gathering berries. Samarin, Kyrill Ivanovich.' He held out his hand.

'Balashov, Gleb Alexeyevich.' His hand was long, cool and soft-skinned. Samarin's was rougher, hot and chapped. Both men were about the same age; thirty.

Samarin sat on the rail and lashed his boots on. Balashov watched him, holding the bag in front of him with both hands.

'Why are you walking?' said Samarin. 'Are the trains too fast?'

'There are no trains any more. Only military ones. It's forbidden to travel on them.'

'I saw a train.'

'That was a military train. A Czech train. The Czechs shoot at you if you try to climb onto them.'

'Czechs? Is this still Siberia?'

'Siberia.'

Samarin looked carefully at Balashov, as if trying to work out whether he was a liar, or an idiot. Balashov cleared his throat and looked away. He squeezed the handle of the bag till the leather creaked. He looked round, behind him, over the edge of the bridge, craning his neck. He cried out, dropped the bag and grasped the guard rail. When the bag hit the ground it fell on its side and objects spilled out of it. Balashov paid no attention.

'There are horses down there!' he said. 'Injured!'

'They're dead,' said Samarin. 'They fell from one of the wagons in the train. I saw them fall.'

'Poor beasts. Are you sure? I should go down. Perhaps one of them is still alive. When will men start leaving the horses

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out of their wars?' He looked at Samarin as if he hoped for an answer.

Samarin laughed. 'You won't get down there. I almost killed myself climbing up. Well, you have me. All this time I've been gathering berries and the first man I meet when I come out of the forest is someone who cares more about the horses who went to war than the men who went with them. It's like the Englishwoman who went to hell and saw millions of the damned being tormented by demons while they loaded burning hot coals onto donkey carts with their bare hands, and she said: "Oh, those poor donkeys!"'

'Horses don't go to war,' said Balashov. 'Men take them.'

'There's another dead horse up there,' said Samarin, nodding towards the mouth of the tunnel.

Balashov turned, drew in breath, and ran towards where the dead chestnut lay, about fifty metres away. Samarin watched him go and when he saw him bend over the animal and place his hand on its neck he squatted down by Balashov's bag. A small, heavy, bound roll of canvas had spilled out of it. There was a loaf, a jar of pickled peppers with a Chinese label, and a pamphlet called *Nine Secret Ways To End Sorrow*. Looking over his shoulder to check on Balashov, Samarin opened the canvas roll. A set of surgical instruments was there, a whole crooked jaw of points and blades and scissors in cosy gums of cloth. Samarin rummaged comfortably inside the bag and found a litre bottle of raw spirit, which he sniffed at and took a swig from. He took out a large cloth, once white, now stiff with dried blood. He pushed it back in the bag together with the pamphlet and took out the last item, a dog-eared cardboard wallet the size of an envelope, fixed shut with a piece of elastic. He opened the wallet and pulled a photograph from a grease-proof paper pocket inside. It was the portrait of a young woman,

not a stiff Sunday-best provincial studio shot but something intimate, real and close; she was resting her head on her hand and perhaps looking too intently into the camera lens – it was too dark to be sure, or make out details. The back of the picture was blank. He put wallet and photo inside his outer coat, set the bag upright, put the bottle, the roll and the cloth back in, and began cramming the bread and peppers into his mouth. He ate quickly, with his head bowed and his eyes lowered.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Samarin, chewing, when Balashov returned. ‘The food fell out of your bag. I was hungry. Here.’ He handed Balashov the remains of the loaf with one hand while draining the brine out of the pickle jar into his mouth with the other.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Balashov. He waved the crust away. ‘Your health. It’s only an hour’s walk to Yazyk.’

‘Can I get an express to Petersburg from there?’

‘You’ve been gathering berries a long time.’

‘Yes. Yes, I have.’

‘I told you. There are no trains,’ said Balashov. He was looking inside the bag. His hands fluttered against the inner sides like a trapped bird, getting madder. ‘Did you see a cardboard wallet? It had a photograph inside.’

‘A wallet?’ said Samarin. ‘No, I don’t believe so. Who was the picture of?’

‘Anna Petrov- but you wouldn’t know her, of course.’

‘Anna Petrovna! Your wife?’

‘No, I have no wife.’ Balashov was on his hands and knees, searching the track bedding. It was almost completely dark by now. ‘An acquaintance, that’s all. She asked me to take it to Verkhny Luk in relation to some documents but . . . nobody is giving out documents now.’

‘What a pity you’ve lost it! And what a pity I can’t see it. Anna Petrovna. That’s the kind of name that allows you to

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imagine any kind of woman, doesn't it, Gleb Alexeyevich? Blonde pigtails, short red hair, a young student, an old babushka, maybe with a limp, maybe without. On a name like that you can draw your own picture. It's not like, I don't know, Yevdokiya Filemonovna, who could only be a brunette, with warts and a big bosom. Anna Petrovna. A highly moral person, probably. Or is she a bit of a slut, I wonder?'

'No!' said Balashov. 'She's the widow of a cavalry officer, she has a young son, and she is of the highest possible moral character.'

'Excellent. And how admirable that you make it your business to be her errand boy.'

'I'm a storekeeper in Yazyk. And a barber, sometimes. I was going to Verkhny Luk on business. It's two days' walk back that way. I have a stall. I cut all their hair, I shave those who want it' – Balashov was speaking faster and faster, opening and closing the bag.

'Gleb Alexeyevich!' said Samarin, putting his hand on Balashov's shoulder. 'Don't worry. You don't have anything to explain. You're a peaceful, law-abiding citizen, going about your business. Look at me, now. Am I not the wild one? Should I not be the one explaining myself?'

Balashov laughed nervously. 'It's dark,' he said.

'Not as dark as it'll be in the tunnel,' said Samarin.

'Oh,' said Balashov. 'Are you going to Yazyk too?'

'It's the nearest town?'

'By far.'

'Then I have to warn them about the man who's following me.'

The two men walked along between the tracks, just visible in the starless night. As they passed the dead horse at the tunnel mouth, Balashov crossed himself and murmured a prayer.

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‘Usually when there are two of us walking through the tunnel at night, we hold hands,’ said Balashov.

‘Well, we are in Asia,’ said Samarin. Balashov took Samarin’s hand and led him forward into the tunnel. Their feet began to sound mighty in the gravel and the blackness fizzed infinite around them. Samarin coughed and the cough took off, alive, along the invisible brickwork. After a few hundred metres Samarin stopped. Balashov tried to walk on but Samarin tightened his grip on his hand and, rather than struggling, Balashov waited.

‘Are you afraid?’ asked Samarin’s voice.

‘No.’ Balashov’s voice wavered.

‘Why not? I am.’

‘God is here.’

‘No,’ said Samarin. ‘There isn’t one of them. This darkness is what there is to be afraid of. To go to sleep here, to wake up in darkness and silence.’ He let go of Balashov’s hand. ‘Alone. And with no way of determining who you are. You can listen to the sound of your voice. But is it really you?’ He seemed to be speaking from far away, as if the being behind the words was attending to many things at once.

‘I am not alone!’ shouted Balashov. His voice rolled back and forward down the tunnel, sizing it to the heightened perception of their ears. It was no longer infinite. Samarin grabbed Balashov and embraced him. Hesitantly, Balashov put his arms around Samarin and gave a weak hug in return.

‘I’m sorry, my friend,’ said Samarin. ‘Of course you’re not alone. I’m here. Here’s my hand. I’ve been away for too long.’

They walked on. ‘Once I was lost in the forest for a week,’ said Balashov. ‘It was this time of year. At night I was terrified of the wild beasts but I didn’t dare light a fire in case outlaws saw it. I lay in a blanket in the dark after walking all day, trying not to fall asleep till I thought my eyes were about

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to bleed from the pain of it. Sometimes I heard wolves. The silence was worse. You would long to hear frogs, or an owl, even though they sound like souls begging to be allowed to move on, and instead an hour would pass in silence and then there was a rustling nearby and you would think of the teeth of the beast snatching at your leg and jerking you out of the stillness and you screaming and pleading but knowing the animal couldn't understand you and had no good or evil in it to reason with. Even in the midst of the fear and the pain of staying awake I began to see that the horror in the beast when it came would be all within me. I would feel cruelty and the pain of a death alone in the wilderness but it wouldn't be of the wolf's making, the wolf is only part of God's workings, and God is good; all the horror of it I was carrying with me, as fear, and the wolf would take that from me and there would be nothing between me and God any longer.'

'What if it wasn't a wild beast? What if it was another man?' said Samarin quietly.

'That couldn't have been so terrible. Up to the very moment of death you'd hope they would save you from the horror in themselves, that they'd change their minds. You'd believe they were mistaken. But the beasts didn't come that time, nobody came in the night. In the end I fell asleep, and instead of nightmares, the dreams I had were beautiful, of paradise and the memory of an eternity of joy. When I woke up, when I realised I'd woken up, I was miserable, as if the one I loved the most had died. I walked through the day and the memory of the dream would fade until by night I was terrified again. One evening I saw the lights of a village and I knew I was safe. But a new terror came up in me, stronger than the old one. I was afraid that all the nightmares I hadn't dreamed in my time in the wilderness would come to me at once in the first night of sanctuary.'

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Samarin stopped and came close to Balashov. His breath touched Balashov's face. 'Did they?' he whispered. 'Did that happen?'

'No!' said Balashov, trying to pull his face back from Samarin's hot breath. 'They never came.'

'Of course not,' said Samarin. 'Of course not. Good. On.'

The two men walked out of the tunnel into the smell of the larches on either side of a cutting. A clouded night had come and there was nothing to be seen but a sheen where the rails were and the faint black serration of the trees against the sky. A flock of geese flew overhead, crying like a shutterhinge in the wind. Samarin's broken boots made a slithering, flapping sound on the track bedding.

'What year is it?' said Samarin.

'1919.'

'There's still a war, I suppose.'

'It's a different kind of war. One where you can't understand who is on which side. In the old war, the one against the Germans and the Austrians, it was ours against theirs. Now it's more ours against ours. There are Whites and there are Reds. The Whites are for the Tsar – he's dead now, the Reds killed him – and the Reds are for everybody being equal.'

'What are you for, Gleb Alexeyevich?'

Balashov was silent for a long time. Eventually he said, in a stretched voice: 'Everybody is equal before God.'

'But how do you live that?'

'What kind of a convict are you?'

Samarin, who was in front, stopped and turned round. The moon had risen behind the clouds and a bare ration of light daubed the men's faces in infant shadows. Samarin's face had lost its animation and settled into an empty stillness.

'I thought in Siberia people referred to us as "unfortunates,"' he said.

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Balashov took a pace back. 'So we do, but . . . you don't talk like a convict.'

'That's good after five years among them.' Samarin's features began to unfreeze, and once his face animated, it was as if the dead emptiness that had come across it could not have truly happened. He snapped off a piece of fern and began picking off the fronds. He sang a few lines of a song too faintly for Balashov to make out the words, except for the phrase *among the worlds*.

'I did break the law, and I have escaped from a labour camp,' Samarin said. 'But I'm not a criminal.'

'A political.'

'Yes.'

'You're an intellectual. A socialist.'

Samarin laughed and looked into Balashov's eyes, knowing and familiar. 'Something of that breed,' he said. 'I ran from the White Garden. Have you heard of it? It's a thousand miles to the north of here.'

'Was there gold there?' said Balashov vaguely. 'I didn't know there was a labour camp at the White Garden.'

'There was labour, but there was no gold,' said Samarin. 'I suppose you'd like to know why I was a prisoner there.'

'I don't need to know,' said Balashov. 'It seems to me that curiosity about strangers is a kind of sin, in a way.'

'Heh! That's a very congenial way of thinking. Are you sure you've never done time yourself?'

'No. I was never a prisoner. Except in the way all our souls are prisoners of our bodies. Kyrill Ivanovich.'

'Oh yes, the soul body thing. Yes. Well. If you believe in that, I suppose.'

'In Yazyk we do. We believe in salvation. Most of us have been saved.'

'Salvation,' laughed Samarin. He began walking on and Balashov followed a few paces behind. Neither man spoke for a time. Occasionally Samarin stumbled or coughed. Balashov moved quietly, stepping from sleeper to sleeper as if he knew each one even in the dark. He broke the silence.

'Of course, Kyrill Ivanovich, if you want to tell me why you were a prisoner, it would be a sin to prevent you,' he said.

'No, you were right,' said Samarin curtly.

'Only I remember you spoke earlier about a warning. About a man who was following you.'

'Yes. Perhaps it would be better if I turned back. Did you hear the story about the monk who arrived in a small town in Poland one time, rang the bell in the marketplace, gathered all the citizens and told them that he had come to warn them of a terrible plague which would soon afflict them? Somebody asked him who was carrying the plague. The monk said: "I am."'

'I see,' said Balashov.

'I was an engineering student in a town near Penza. There was a girl, another student. Katya. Well, the name doesn't matter. We were friends. She got mixed up with the wrong sort of people. So did I. Katya went further than me. This was back when the Tsar was still in charge. She ended up carrying a bomb. I liked her, and didn't want her to be arrested, so I stole the bomb from her. Then I was arrested. They sentenced me to ten years' hard in the White Garden.'

'So far north,' said Balashov. 'It must have been difficult there.'

After a while, Samarin said: 'You can't imagine how far, how cold, how forgotten. One night I went out with the intention of not going back. The darkness seemed twice as dark as this. The wind was so strong you felt like a piece of straw in it. I thought about what they'd say about me and understood

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it'd be nothing. I was part of no human movement and if all five hundred of us, the convicts, walked out of the barracks and lay down in the snow the snow would cover us and we wouldn't have touched history. Do you understand? We would have left no mark. We were the history of the moon. We were the history of air and water. There were holes waiting for us in the ice, we'd be the colour of ice and fit the holes. I thought if I ran to the wire and hit it hard enough I wouldn't feel anything, I'd sleep just the same, the wind'd shake me like an anchor in a storm and the cloth of the coat'd get caught in the barbs, and when they found the body and took it down they wouldn't be able to pick all the threads off the wire, and the wire'd fall and rust but the threads'd be there, my outline, a sign that some man ran against the wire, some time, and it'd be some tiny atom of the future better world, the memory of a man running through the darkness to his death, not lying down to let the snow cover him.'

'God was surely watching over you to bring you here,' said Balashov.

'God didn't bring me here,' said Samarin. 'A man brought me here. The man who is following me now. The Mohican. Have you heard his name?'

'No. I mean, I know the novel, of course.'

'This Mohican is no older than you or me, and he has the respect of all the great thieves, from Odessa to Sakhalin. They're afraid of him. The Mohican climbs over bodies to get where he wants to go just as lightly as you're stepping on those sleepers there. Even in prison, he was the freest man I ever met. The ties that form at once between two people, whether they're brothers or complete strangers like us, don't exist for him. He doesn't deal in honour, or duty, or obligation, or care.'

'And yet he took you with him when he escaped.'

'Yes. He took me for food. We ran in January, when there is nothing to eat in the taiga, let alone the tundra, and the deer herders are too far south. He took me with him intending to slaughter, butcher and eat me, like a pig.'

'God have mercy on us.'

'What could be better than food that walks alongside you, carries your goods, and keeps you company until the day you eat it?'

'Christ in Heaven, Kyrill Ivanovich, did he try?'

'He tried. I ran. I'm a day ahead of him, I reckon.'

'But if he made it this far, why would he need to . . . there's not much food in Yazyk, but . . .'

Samarin laughed and punched Balashov on the shoulder. 'Gleb Alexeyevich, you should be in the music hall! You're funny! Is that a train?'

The tracks were singing. A grey stroke of light flickered across the sky to the east, from the direction the men were heading. Balashov and Samarin stepped off the tracks, which ran along an embankment. The tracks sang louder and hissed and trembled. The train had a searchlight mounted on a pintle on a flat car. It came round the curve in the track, heading west, with two white lamps shining from the locomotive, trailing red sparks, and the searchlight sweeping the trees, blinding the owls and driving the panic-stricken martens miles away from the line on either side. As it came past Samarin began to run. Balashov shouted at him to stop. There was a flash of light and a report. Samarin jumped, grabbed at a chain hanging from one of the wagons, lifted his feet off the ground, swung for a fraction of a second, then fell and slid down the embankment, rolling into a coil of limbs in bracken at the foot. Balashov came over and pulled him to his feet.

'Your hand is cut,' said Balashov.

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'Let me put some of that spirit on,' said Samarin. Balashov hesitated. 'I had a swig earlier.'

'I know,' said Balashov. 'I smelled it on your breath.' He took a handkerchief out of his pocket, soaked it in spirit and cleaned the cut. He asked Samarin if he had heard the gunshot. 'I think the bullet broke a branch over there,' he said, nodding at the trees. 'You were lucky. As I said, you can't understand who's on which side now. The old war didn't end cleanly. There were remnants everywhere in Russia, leftovers, like the Czechs. Russia took them prisoner in the old war, when they didn't have a country of their own. Now they do, and they're trying to get back to it, but they've got caught up in this new war. They're White, officially. But half of them are Red. There are thousands of them all over Siberia. They've taken over the whole of the Trans-Siberian railway, can you imagine? None of it makes any sense.'

'Everything makes sense,' said Samarin. 'Except you.'

Balashov laughed. 'We should go,' he said.

They walked on in silence until Samarin said: 'No, I mean it. Really, you are the one who makes no sense.'

'I don't understand,' said Balashov, his voice wavering as his throat dried up.

'You're not a barber. Unless you're a very *bad* barber. Barbers don't use scalpels and spirit and make their customers bleed like hogs.'

'Sometimes my hand slips when I'm shaving.'

'Shaving what? Shaving a throat with a scalpel?'

'Please, Kyrill Ivanovich, you must understand how far we are from the nearest hospital. Sometimes I carry out small surgical procedures.'

'I can believe you belong to one of these crackpot Siberian sects. I can believe everyone in your, what was it, Yazyk, does.'

But you're too well born to be a barber, or a storekeeper, and you're too stupid to be a political exile.'

'Mr Samarin, I'm begging you. You've already said how content you are to avoid deep inquiry into other people's lives, when they do not want their lives inquired into.'

Samarin stopped, turned, and put out his hand to stroke Balashov's chin. Balashov turned sharply away. 'I know what you are,' said Samarin. He sank to his knees, held back his head and laughed at the sky, a full, long, savoured laugh. He levelled his head and looked at Balashov, shaking his head. 'I know what you are. I know what you've done, and I know what you've lost. Extraordinary. Do the Czechs know about this? No, obviously not. They probably think you're just regular crackpots. Well, this is very funny, although I'll bet the man – man? Boy? – in Verkhny Luk isn't laughing.'

'Not lost,' whispered Balashov.

'I'm sorry?'

'You said: "What we lost." We lost nothing except a burden, and gained a new life.'

Samarin yawned and nodded. 'I'm cold,' he said. 'As soon as I start thinking about being inside a warm building, I get cold.' He began to move and Balashov followed, keeping a good ten paces behind, now.

'What are you going to do?' said Balashov after a while.

'I'm headed for Petersburg.'

'But there are no trains. And there's fighting in that direction down the line.'

'I'll just have to persuade your Czechs to put me on one of their trains. Who's their commander?'

'His name is Matula,' said Balashov. 'But he is not altogether normal. His soul is sick.'

'It's curious that you say other people are not normal.'

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'Kyrill Ivanovich, please, whatever you do, don't speak of our nature aloud in Yazyk. The Czechs, as you say, don't know. We told them the children of the town were sent away to Turkestan to keep them safe.'

'Turkestan! You old entertainer. And what about your friend Anna Petrovna? And her son Misha?'

'Alyosha, not Misha.'

'So he's called Alyosha.'

'Please don't hurt Anna Petrovna.'

'Why should I?' asked Samarin. Up until this point he had been speaking without looking back at Balashov but now he turned. He sounded curious. 'Is she worth hurting?'

Points of light appeared between the trees ahead.

'There's Yazyk,' said Balashov.

Samarin stopped and looked at the lights.

'Poor little town,' he said. 'Listen. There's something you've got to tell me. Has a Tungus shaman been bothering the people lately? Some native charlatan who wandered out of the woods not long ago on a mangy reindeer, talking prophecies and trying to cadge drinks?'

'There's one who sleeps in the yard outside Captain Matula's shtab.'

'The devil there is. How many eyes does he have?'

'One.'

Samarin stepped up to Balashov. 'One good eye, you mean,' he said.

'One good eye, and two bandages, one over his bad eye and one over his forehead. He claims to have a third eye there, but no-one has ever seen it.'

'Mm,' said Samarin. 'Poor fellow. I fear he's the first on the Mohican's list.'

'You should wait here until the morning,' said Balashov.

'There are Czech soldiers on the edge of town at night. There's a curfew. You don't have a pass.'

'Give me the bottle,' said Samarin.

'It's not good for drinking, Kyrill Ivanovich.'

'I told you to give it to me.' Samarin's voice had altered. It sounded more as it had in the darkness of the tunnel, an older voice quite shorn of anything of a passionate man's highs and lows.

'I – I don't feel inclined to give you the bottle, Kyrill Ivanovich.'

'You're not a fighter.'

'No, but you should not take the bottle if I don't want to give it to you. You said you were not a criminal.'

Samarin's hand darted inside his coat and pulled out his knife. He pressed it against Balashov's cheek. 'Give me the bottle before I finish what you started.'

Balashov put the bag on the ground, bending away from the knifeblade carefully, brought out the bottle and gave it to Samarin.

'Now I've got no good reason to kill you,' said Samarin. 'You'll say nothing about meeting me tonight, as if it didn't happen. I'll say nothing about what you were up to in Verkhny Luk. We never met. I hope that's understood. What's on the other side of those trees?'

'A meadow.'

Samarin kicked away, ran through the trees and disappeared into the dark meadow, with Balashov calling after him to wait, and not to hurt Anna Petrovna. He heard Samarin's voice calling once, his younger voice: 'Comedian!'