

Valeria Gordeev

The Cicada Sheds Its Shiny Golden Skin

Publication August 2026. 640 pages

- Winner of the 2023 Ingeborg Bachmann Prize for her short story *He Cleans* (Granta, Issue #165, 2023) – now her long-awaited debut novel
- Winner of the 2026 Literary Prize of the Jürgen Ponto Foundation
- With illustrations by the author
- English sample translation available



A family between Kyiv, Moscow and Berlin

Konstantin and Lada are siblings, divided by an unbridgeable silence. While Konstantin works in Moscow for a research institute responsible for preserving Lenin's body, Lada lives in Berlin as an artist. They have had no contact since the outbreak of the war. Lada cannot understand why Konstantin stayed in Moscow, and Konstantin has a task that is causing him headaches: his godfather has ordered him to steal rare biological specimens from the institute he works for.

Valeria Gordeev masterfully weaves the intimate story of a family between Berlin, Kyiv and Moscow into the grand, turbulent upheavals of our present day.

In Valeria Gordeev's novel the boundaries between real history, true science, and literary fiction blur in a fascinating way. The author practices a literary archaeology, taking real historical artifacts but embedding them into a surreal, fictional framework. The historical trauma of a nation is not only layered within the soil, but drags the life of every single individual in this novel down into the archaeological abyss.



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Valeria Gordeev was born in Tübingen in 1986. She works as an author and illustrator. She has received numerous awards for her writing. In 2023, she won the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize at the 47th German Literature Days in Klagenfurt. *The Cicada Slips Out of Its Shiny Golden Shell* is her debut novel which was awarded the Literary Prize of the Jürgen Ponto Foundation 2026.



'I see here that you've ticked English as well as German: if you'd prefer to conduct the interview in English, I would, at this point, refer you to my colleague – otherwise I will simply continue.

'The study you have agreed to participate in is a human trial without remedial treatment. This means that the product we will administer nasally, in the form of a spray, is not designed to cure illness; it's a substance that influences your mood. As part of the experiment, you will be shown a video clip of a distressing crisis situation that promises little hope of improvement. It's important that you watch very carefully and don't look away. We are investigating whether and to what extent the stimulation of certain areas of the brain during this stressful experience affects the frequency of subsequent involuntary and/or recurring memories – that's what this helmet is for. Don't worry, you're not the first person I've worked with in the context of this study and I'm sure you won't be the last. The scenes have a good tolerability profile and so far no one has found them unduly disturbing. Furthermore, you are free to revoke your declaration of consent at any time without being penalised. You're not on any medication, you're not pregnant or breastfeeding?

'Before I dim the lights, I would ask you to fill out these questionnaires on a scale of one for *completely disagree* to five for *completely agree*. The final sheet informs you about possible side effects. These include, at worst, occasional nausea, fatigue and an irregular pulse; in rare cases an allergic reaction may occur. If you're in the placebo group, the nasal spray will consist only of a saline

solution. I will be in the evaluation room for the duration of the video. Please knock on the glass when you're done.

'Did you have any trouble doing up the strap?'

+ + +

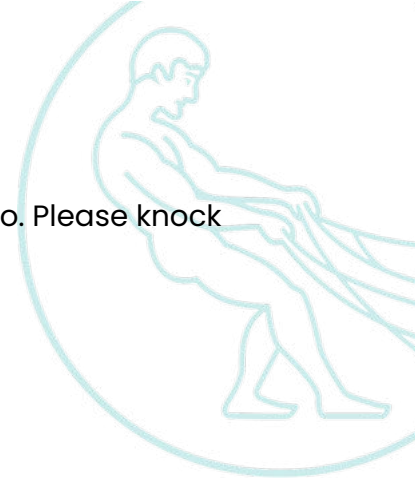
ARCHEOLOGY TV

live

Let's start with a tract of wasteland to the south of Moscow. We see dirt paths criss-crossing the site, beehives stacked in towers, the shadow of a small cloud. The patch of meadow, which we've marked off with flags, covers an area of ten by ten metres: poppies, couch grass, lupins. In the middle of the site are our technicians. Zlata is responsible for the ground radar. Nadya regulates the orientation of the antennae. We see her wave, blinking into the sky. The camera responsible for these images is following the spinning Earth from a height of eleven thousand metres. Here goes.

Signal noise. Our waves have penetrated the turf. Contours appear and then vanish again. It can take a while for the scan to produce results. Streaks flicker across the image, which has yet to be calculated, generated from figures derived from our measurements. In order to see anything down here, we must first produce it; we have to set limits, make a selection – now the data have come in. A dull brown, a faded yellow, the occasional crevice leading into the blackness. We have chosen colours that appear as they would in a well-lit environment. If you were hoping for a glimpse of a mole in its lair, I'm afraid we have to disappoint you. We're already too far down for that.

Peat and clay, sand and stone. There must once have been a river here. The orientation of the sand grains tells us which way it flowed, where it



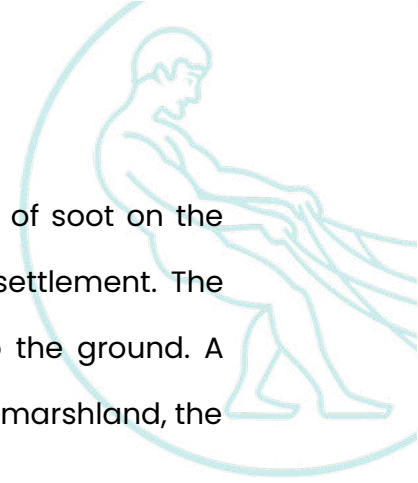
meandered. On the riverbank are the remains of a firepit: traces of soot on the bone plates of a sturgeon. A little way to the right was a hut settlement. The wooden stakes have been preserved, trunks of pine driven into the ground. A small wood must have been felled. By then the river had become marshland, the sturgeons were gone.

Let's change the settings again. Seen vertically, the structures appear clearer; the stratification is plainly visible. In the neat layers of strata, we can track the weather and trace the seasons. We can even establish the precise moment at which a grain of sand was exposed to the sun. Thaws swell the earth; spring breezes blow pollen across the land. Here, a forest fire indicates a drought in year one. Four dry years in the first decade. After that came a downpour that soaked the fields, a flood that destroyed the harvest, a spate of mud that left debris in its wake. Crop failures and droughts, hunger and suffering – everything has its time and place.

Or so it seems. Not everywhere are the strata as undisturbed. To get an impression of the extent of the devastation, we have only to shift the camera a little to the right. Here, time twists and turns, loops the loop, spirals off into a labyrinthine tangle. It's pure chaos. What took millennia to break down is hauled to the surface, mixed with debris and buried under new strata.

Take a look at this: through a series of unlikely circumstances, a German stick-type incendiary bomb has stuck in a layer of clay. Decades have corroded the shell, but the bomb is still live. Then there's this bottle top, casually dropped in the bed load of an ice-age river: Пепси-Кола between the two halves of a bipolar world order – how did it end up here?

We marvel at a butterfly nut that has lodged itself in the top of a shell – the shell of a sea snail that died out at the end of the Cambrian – and we puzzle over the pieces of plastic in the pores of a limestone rock. The skeleton at the top of the image is that of an otter, a female, her spine nicely curved like a question mark. If



we zoom in a bit, we can see the bones of her young. Was she caught by an earth slide while she was suckling them? And what was the fate of this huntswoman who lay down to die here, stretched out on the petrified moss? The hand axe she is clutching is still sharp enough to slay a wild goat, or an aurochs, or a sabre-toothed tiger. The tusks in her leather pouch may have served as talismans, the shells around her cervical vertebrae as ornaments. All we can determine with any certainty is her bone density. Everything else is speculation.

Microorganisms eat their way through the ages, establishing colonies and dividing the territory among themselves. Some of these organisms do not die, or only as a result of accidents; others survive by joining forces: the whip-tailed with the spider-footed, the blind with the sighted, the dot-shaped with the web-like, the gelatinous with the hairy, the slitherers with the crawlers, the diggers with the suckers – we have given each biotope a different colour; blended colours indicate overlap between the areas. The strain of bacteria filling the right-hand side of the image is more than twenty thousand years old and successfully integrated in a community of slime mould. Ciliates have taken up residence in the gut of an earthworm. Nutrients are obtained from the planks of the filled-up well, the buttresses of the burnt city ramparts, the timbers of the torn-down church, but it's all still there: the striving and straining, the vast quantity of energy spent. The fuel simply takes on a different form; the process of transformation is never complete.

The city, the foundations. Walls of steel and concrete mark its boundaries. Right angles are set out, cavities, railway tracks. Two stations. The secret one, dark and deserted, with gas masks for the city's VIP lungs. The other, bright and opulent. Escalators roll down, down, down beneath chandeliers, carrying crowds of bodies in time with the one-a-minute trains. Between the stations is a shaft sunk deeper into the earth than any other building in the city – we'll come back to this in a moment. First, we will cross another river that's been banished underground: the Neglinka, a tributary of the Moskva. Many of the pipes are silted

up, but water still flows in the stone-walled sewers. There are turtles living here, a colony of about eighty, unperturbed by the lack of sunlight. Being albinos, they are well adapted to this environment; we have classified them as *emys subterranea*. On the brickwork, we see graffiti. Two swastikas to sixty-seven hammer and sickles. A picture of three children holding hands, each child a different colour: pink, orange, brown. The sun shining down on them is yellow. *Gala and Ana, Lyuda and Sasha were here on 20 October 1986*. Ilya I's phone number is accompanied by an offer for casual sex. We are under the Red Square.

The Kremlin, der Kreml, le Kremlin. The hill, on which the brick-red fortress sits enthroned, is twenty-five metres high, a small bump on the face of the earth. The rooms aren't worth looking at; more interesting are the branching underground passages. Some are reinforced with boulders; others are lined with walls so thick they could withstand a nuclear strike. There are so many it's easy to lose your way. One passage, which we've marked in purple, leads straight to this steel construction that's now in the centre of the image. It looks like an upside-down Tatlin's Tower boring its way into the earth. Something is moving. That's right: it's the lift. Let's zoom in a little closer.

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INTERFAX: 'March of Justice' – Wagner Troops Seize Control in Rostov-on-Don

Rostov-on-Don, 24 June – As many sources have reported, units of the private paramilitary organisation Wagner led by oligarch and mercenary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin have occupied military facilities after an aeroplane and six military helicopters were shot down during fights between the Wagner group and the Russian Armed Forces. Prigozhin cited conflicts with the army leadership as the reason for the uprising, accusing them of 'slaughtering pure Russian men at the

behest of non-Russian decision-makers' and of weaving a web of lies about the course of the special military operation in Ukraine and the reasons it was launched. He said that Ukraine had never presented a threat and that Russian reports of the high intercept rate of Ukrainian attacks had no basis in fact. In a post on his Telegram channel, he called on supporters to join his mercenary army in a 'march of justice' to Moscow. Observers assume that the march will be heavily armed, because Prigozhin's troops are coming straight from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict zones.

The President sharply condemned Prigozhin's actions and called for counter-terrorism measures. He dismissed Prigozhin's accusations as the ravings of a sick man who had made his fortune in gambling and prostitution and tried to stab Russia in the back.

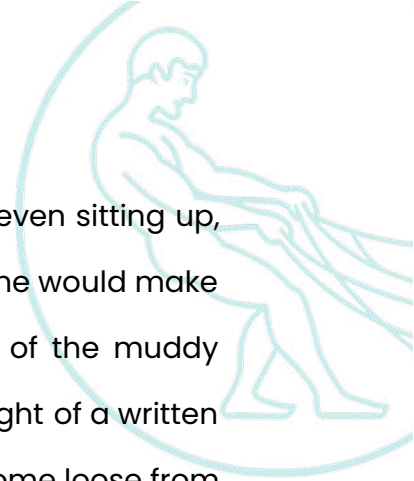
It's not the first time that Prigozhin has been critical of the Tatar and Tuvan origins of some of the officials and members of the Federal Security Council. His mercenary army, named after the German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883), is a private enterprise which, according to current estimates, comprises approximately twenty-five thousand militiamen who also play a key role in the conflict zones of the special military operation.

The general public is advised to cancel trips and avoid the motorways because of potential closures on several roads. The army has set up checkpoints. In many regions, a state of emergency has been announced.

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When Lada Molot couldn't get to sleep, because she was plagued by worries or kept awake for other reasons – because the man next to her wouldn't sit still, for instance, but tossed and turned or scratched his chin as the road signs flashed past (it was the longest bus journey she'd ever embarked on), or because the

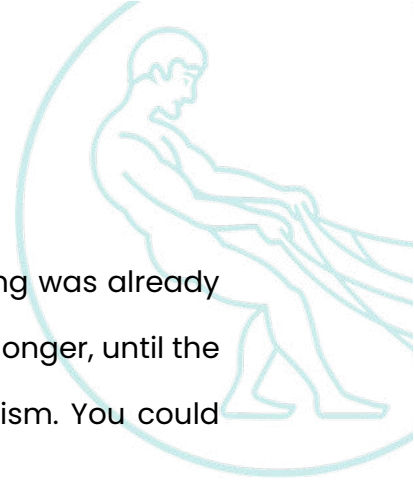
other passengers, the ones who had no trouble getting to sleep, even sitting up, mumbled in their dreams or breathed noisily – in such situations, she would make German words out of Cyrillic letters. She would fish a word out of the muddy waters of her brain and wait to see what happened. Just the thought of a written word created a kind of suspense. Then bits and pieces began to come loose from the structure and everything rearranged itself.



<i>You haven't</i>	Ю ХАВНТ
<i>behaved</i>	БИХЭЙВД
<i>yourself</i>	ЮРСЕЛФ
<i>today,</i>	ТУДЭЙ,
<i>you are</i>	Ю АР
<i>a naughty</i>	А НОТИЙ
<i>child.</i>	ЧАЙЛД.

All that in a Russian accent. The accent (it was her mother's voice) was part of the metamorphosis; the rest came from the distortion which, whatever else it was, was not a translation. A secret language, her brother would say; she'd simply swapped the letters, switched to a different sign system – and yet there was more to it than that. Behind the writing, too, something had shifted, as though she'd set something in motion, found a way of reaching inside the words and manipulating them.

<i>Mother tongue</i>	МАЗЕР ТАНГ
<i>Proof of income</i>	ПРУФ ОВ ИНКАМ
<i>Resettlement-</i>	РИСЭТЛМЕНТ-
<i>appointment-</i>	АПОЙНТМЕНТ-
<i>schedule</i>	ШЭДЮЛ



That was too much. By the time she reached the end, the beginning was already unravelling. Shorter words were better; you could stare at them for longer, until the signs shifted. A kind of magic or animism, a destructive mechanism. You could reduce the words to scrap or breathe life into them.

Bread isn't БРЭД isn't ХЛЕБ isn't *khleb* – the yeast didn't take. The dough collapsed – *khlebsed* – a disappointment, a nasty-tasting loaf, a shapeless mess slapped wetly onto the table in a state of *khlebs*. You'd never turn *khleb* like that back into ХЛЕБ; you'd never make bread out of a loaf of БРЭД.

Sometimes she imagined herself in a station waiting room, looking up at a display board: *Arrivals / Departures* – the flaps whirred and fluffed up their feathers.

Bird towns:

<i>Blackbird am Main,</i>	БЛАКБЫРД АМ МАЙН
<i>Gullda,</i>	ГАЛДА
<i>Henover and</i>	ХЭНОВЕР
<i>Berlinnet,</i>	БЕРЛИНЕТ
calling at <i>Thrusheldorf.</i>	СРАШЕЛДОРФ

Or she'd turn to the laundry that was piled up in the bathroom and think of clothes she had worn as she put a wash on.

Only one sleeve of her ТОП (*top*) was inside-out; the rest stayed neatly buttoned-up, but her ДЖАМПЕР (*jumper*) was falling apart, a sagging mess of threads and loops on the verge of unravelling, and her НИКЕРЗ (*knickers*) didn't look much better; the word was in ТАТЕРЗ (*tatters*). А ЛАНЖЕРИСТИК ДИСГРЭЙС (*lingeristic disgrace*) that you had to hold on to if you didn't want it slipping down

to your knees – can't someone put this threadbare РЭЧ (*wretch*) out of its misery? It kept coming back to haunt her.

With every wash, the proportion of ХОЛЗ (*holes*) to ФАБРИК (*fabric*) grew: СЛИЦ (*slits*) for eyes, НОСТРИЛЗ (*nostrils*), а ГАШ (*gash*) for the mouth. А ДЖОК (*joke*), a garment for ЭКСИБИШОНИСЦ (*exhibitionists*) that revealed more than it concealed, a disaster in every public changing room, its grinning ФЭЙС (*face*) sneering at her from the mirror.

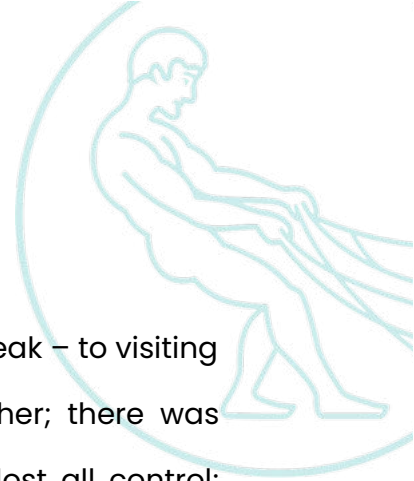
Her mother had exorcised the knicker ДИМОН (*demon*) by cutting it up with a pair of СИЗОРЗ (*scissors*); to complete the process of ХЮМИЛИЙЭЙШОН (*humiliation*), she had snipped it into РАГЗ (*rags*). Triangular КЛОС РАГЗ (*cloth rags*) of dubious origins – wring them out and put them in the bin. But no, the БИЙСТ (*beast*) came back to be washed again. Someone should burn these scraps.

Then there were the other obstacles and inhibitions she was up against, like the fact that she only felt at ease in the language if no one spoke to her, or at least if no one expected a reply. She preferred to listen. Parents quarrelling with their children in Russian – *but I just explained to you ...*; long drawn-out cries on the playground – *Máama, máama*; people chatting on trains. The snatches of conversation held huge appeal to her: the sound of the voices, each group an enigma, and all words addressed to her. Whether or not she wanted it to, each word touched her inner world, and when the conversations broke off and the voices were carried on their way, she always felt a little lonely. Like a ДОГ (*dog*), she would think at such moments, on her own again in the carriage, the silent owner of other people's conversations – and imagine the outcry if the ДОГ started to speak. No external communication.

A ШУ (*shoe*) whose sole had shrunk in the wash

A little fly-headed БЫРД (*bird*)

The indestructible ATOM (*atom*)



When she did find herself in the awkward situation of having to speak – to visiting relatives, for instance – she would feel a change come over her; there was nothing she could do about it. She grew smaller and smaller, lost all control; something was turned violently inside out and the person who spoke was a child who had no memory of anything, wasn't yet fully formed. A ВОЙС-БОКС ДУОФ (*voice-box dwarf*), a stunted freak, shrinking from notice, small and vulnerable – and unfortunately, it was impossible to make conversation with this HOM (*gnome*); everything shrivelled and shrank.

Even the alphabet was a kid's affair, a picture ABC. Some of the Cyrillic letters looked like little beetles; others had stings on their tails. Then there were all the bewitched and enchanted letters, signs from a looking-glass world. A magic spell had made them walk backwards, given them different sounds, turned them into sly little changelings – you never knew where you stood with them.

*A wind blew through the words,
rattled all the doors,
laid waste the house.*

А УИНД БЛУ СРУ ЗЫ УЫРДЗ,
РАТЛД ОЛ ЗЫ ДОРЗ,
ЛЭЙД УЭЙСТ ЗЫ ХАУС.

Other words, meanwhile, seemed to be hiding something, but there was no way of knowing what. They were like receptacles for an elusive, ghostly being; on closer examination, you found only an empty skin.

БРЭД was one such receptacle, though you wouldn't have known to look at it. The changes to the letters were by no means extreme; the word was almost recognisable. The form, if nothing else, appeared to be intact. It was a familiar-looking form; you could imagine it round or oval, stick-like or baked in a

tin, braided or rolled – even ФЛАТ (*flat*) was a possibility; it was still bread, a word that brought people together around a table, a word that held warmth.

Those who ate it didn't expect anything fancy or subtle; they wanted security and КАМФОРТ (*comfort*) – the happiness that simplicity brings. They went to it for good, plain fare, feeling that they had a right to basic victuals, *a right to БРЭД!* – though it was true, the first impression was sometimes odd, maybe something to do with the different grain. There it lay on a baking sheet, just out of the oven, its crust firm and brown – a shiny crust, sealed with starch to make it keep. Like the bark of an alder, sycamore or oak – too heavily armoured for a loaf of bread. And yet none could resist the siren call of that warm crust. Inside it, the word, so full of power, so resplendent with meaning, you could almost see the rays coming off it: a holy РЕЛИК (*relic*) baked to a loaf – you approached it on your knees, this



It was highly likely even that your stomach was already preparing itself for this word, producing saliva and digestive enzymes, an imagined smell. And how does it smell? As comforting as a plumped-up cushion in a clean, heated room or a sleeping loved one. Just a crumb – *please* – just one crumb of this word!

But the dream was over the moment anyone cut into the crust. Inside, the loaf was hollow; the middle had been gouged out. A word so empty you could hear it roar; a whimper filled the air. ХАНГЕР (*hunger*) is the word here; this БРЭД is inhuman.

(for God's sake, don't get off)	
<i>Flubach (North-Rhine-Westfailure)</i>	ФЛУБАХ
(НОРД-РАЙН-УЕСТФЭЙЛЯ)	
<i>Gripeswald</i>	ГРАЙПСВАЛД
<i>Bad Belching</i>	БАД БЕЛЧИНГ
<i>Fartsheim</i>	ФАРЦХАЙМ
<i>Shitzehole</i>	ШИЦЕХОЛ



The *lazy words* were a case apart; if she were making a list, she'd have to give them a column of their own. These words, composed of the letters e, a, o, m and t, kept their form, because the signs were the same in both languages:

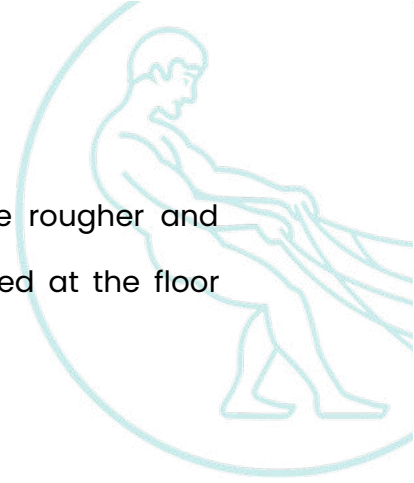
TOMATO
ATOM
TOTEM
AMMO

What was interesting was less the congruence than the discrepancy, which made itself felt in spite of everything. These were different tomatoes, different atoms, different totems – they weren't the same.

MEMO
MOTTO
TA-TA

Such discrepancies were clearest when it came to names; the way she imagined people changed with the alphabet: their expressions, posture, gestures, the way they looked at her, the way they talked, the smell of their clothes – everything

seemed slightly different. Their voices too: women's voices were rougher and more serious, children's voices higher. As for the men, they stared at the floor when they talked; they couldn't look you in the face.



Her МАТЕР (mother) in front of the TV,
disturbed by a pesky ФЛАЙ (fly),
writing МОТТОЗ (mottos) in the air.

Her ГРАН (gran) in a dress made of fluffy yellow ЧИК ДАУН (chick down),
surrounded by a КЛАУД (cloud) of moths.

She could spend hours at this game if she chose to – even a whole night. Outside the bus window, trees were silhouetted against the sky. She and the driver were the only ones awake.

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'Fungi Advice Mycological Association, how may I help you?'

'Hello.'

'Hello.'

'I'm calling because I [*incomprehensible*] That's the problem.'

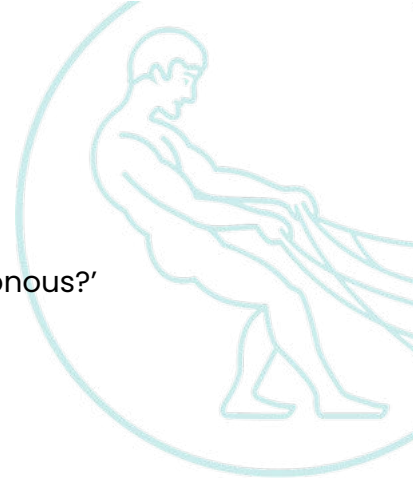
You're calling because you –? I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. What exactly is the problem?'

'... ..'

'Sorry, what did you say? I can't hear if you whisper.'

'I'm calling because I ... [*in a whisper*] I've eaten fungi that may have been poisonous.'

'You've eaten fungi that may have been poisonous?'



'[almost inaudible] Yes.'

'Why did you eat the fungi if you thought they might be poisonous?'

'I ... [incomprehensible] wasn't sure.'

'You weren't sure?'

'I ate a gratin. Someone else picked the mushrooms.'

'You ate fungi picked by someone else that may have been poisonous?'

'Yes.'

'What were these fungi you ate that you think may have been poisonous?'

You don't know their name?'

'I was told they were pine fungi, but I'm pretty sure now that they weren't.'

'Do you mean pine boletes, maybe? *Boletus pinophilus*?'

'They said pine fungi. I only ate the gratin – it was full of them.'

'Are there any specimens that didn't go in the gratin? Any uncooked fungi?'

'I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not.'

'Can you describe the fungi?'

'Didn't look familiar. Didn't look like fungi you should eat. I'm the only one who had the gratin. My wife and her parents didn't. No one else touched it.'

'Do you have any symptoms?'

'My mouth's dry and I've'

'You'll have to talk up, I can't hear you.'

'... ..'

'Hello, are you still there?'

'Just now I'm ... [switches to a whisper] – I don't want ... to hear me.'

'You don't want me to hear you?'

'No ... – I'm in the bathroom and I don't want the others to hear me.'

'The people who picked the mushrooms?'

'Yes.'



'This isn't an emergency line. If you need help, I can inform the emergency services.'

'[shouting] I'M COMING! JUST A MINUTE!'

'Hello?'

'NO, I'M FINE. TELL THEM I'LL BE RIGHT BACK.'

'Hello?'

'[in a whisper] Just a moment, please.'

'Hello?'

'[a crescendo of pattering water] CHOOOOOOOOOOHHHHHHHHHHH ...'

'Hello?'

'SHOOOOOOOOOOHHHHHHHHHHH ...'

'Are you still there?'

'SHOOOOOOOOOOHHHHH – [rushing water in the background] Yes, I'm still here. Just turned the shower on.'

'You just turned the shower on?'

'SHIIIIIIIIIIYOOOOOSH-SHOOO – and the tap –
CHYOOOOOY-SHOOOOOY-SHOOOOOH – and flushed the toilet –
SHOOOOO-SHOOOOO-SHOOOOO-SHOOOOH.'

'Hello?'

'SHOOOOOOOOOOHHHHH'

'Can you describe the fungi you ate?'

'JUST A MINUTE. [laughs] YOU CAN START WITHOUT ME.'

'Hello?'

'I'M FINE!'

'You're fine?'

'SHOOOOOHH – ... NO! I TOLD YOU!'

'You're not fine?'

'BE WITH YOU IN A SECOND!'

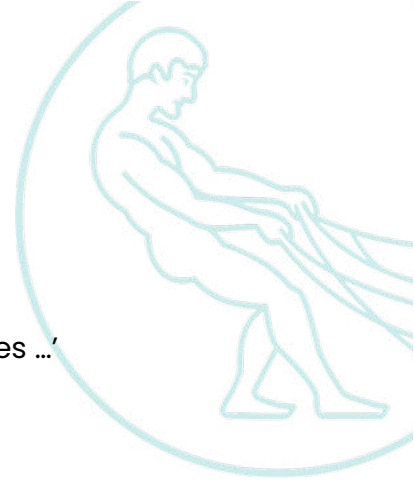
'Hello?'

'AND LEAVE THE DISHES FOR ME ...'

'If you give me your address, I can call the emergency services ...'

'CHYOOOOOY-SHOOOOOY-SHOOH-SHOOOOOY.'

'Hello?'



+ + +

What makes people risk their lives for an idea or a higher purpose when the outcome of the battle is by no means certain? Even if the battle ends well, there's no guarantee they won't meet their deaths along the way. It's madness, there's no other word for it; at the very least, it's irrational, as long as *some* kind of life is still possible, even if it's unfulfilled or painful, overshadowed by threats and the feeling that something is fundamentally wrong – senseless and brutal – so wrong, you sometimes think you can't stand it (and we stand a fair amount). If the chances of survival aren't higher, there's no sound reason to put our most valuable asset on the line.

Of course, people can be deceived, objectives framed in such a way that a person's consent to possibly dying in the process of achieving them is buried in the fine print – and no one reads through the stuff they consent to daily (if they're even asked). Do I approve of the present in which I eke out my life? Do I accept this state of affairs? Doesn't it basically amount to blackmail, or do I have only myself to blame?

Konstantin Molot set little store by opinions; he certainly didn't believe that his own individual opinion could ever be more than just that – his private, personal opinion. He'd never understood why people saw any point in vying with one another over their respective views and pursuing their debates with such energy, when there were facts independent of opinions that had nothing to do

with this constant obscuration of the world. The worst was when people spoke of their *convictions* (as though you could create an alternative reality just by wanting it) or of taking a *stance* on something (another word for ignorance). It was rarely the real questions that people came to blows over; they relied on their rhetorical skills to make sure they got their way. How could you even want decisions to be made on the basis of anything as arbitrary as talent?

Recently, although he'd officially got rid of his stutter, his speech blocks had become more frequent again – a relapse which he saw as the cause for his dreams of disintegration. At the same time, though, he was sleeping well – hadn't slept so deeply for a long time; in the past he'd suffered tortures, tossing about and writhing like a pathetic prawn simmering in self-reproach. If he couldn't sleep, he played chess (he still used the same account, although the old account name made him cringe these days). He didn't get enough exercise, of course. He should leave time for walks the way he used to, deliberately travelling from a different metro station to see more of the city. For a while, he'd even biked to work and he missed cycling too – through the dusk on the bank of the Moskva, the wind in his face and the feeling that there was nothing he couldn't do, no problem he couldn't fix. It was a shame the distance was too far to manage without arriving in a sweat and then being hit by waves of heat at least twice in the first hour of work. Not a state in which to start his working day, though God knows, he'd tried (if he could have a shower, of course, things would be different). He saw a seat come free – no, someone had taken it. The train would be stopping soon.

Later he'd tried taking the underground to work and then cycling back, a combination he'd abandoned after a string of bad experiences. Not that it wasn't possible to get *on* the metro with a bike; it was getting *off* that was hard. By the time you reached the city centre, the exits were so crowded there was no way of reaching the doors (or, if you weren't careful, you had the opposite problem and found yourself being swept up by the throng too soon, carried along on a tide that

it was best not to argue with). In theory, bikes were allowed on the metro, as long as they were the collapsible kind you could fold up and stow under your seat out of harm's way, like a piece of hand luggage. Unfortunately, others took a different view and reacted with irritation – maybe because, in its folded state, the bike looked more like a wheelchair or a kind of spinning wheel with wires and pedals – and the threshold for physical violence was surprisingly low in this country, certainly lower than in the West German university town where he'd grown up. In such situations, it was best not to let on that he understood their rude comments. It helped to have a book he could hold open in front of him – a book with a title in a foreign script that clearly said: this man does not belong here.

Wolfgang

Koeppen

To Russia

and

Elsewhere

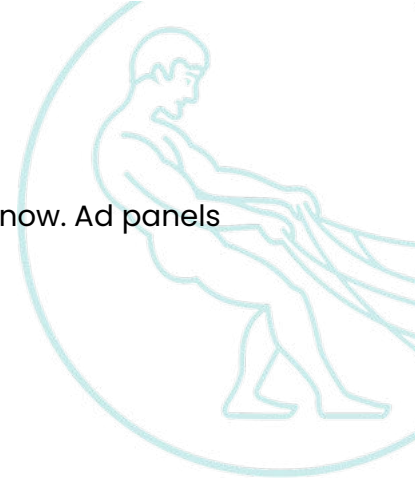
But here was his stop: Revolution Square. The doors opened. A flood of people got off the train and headed for the three-lane escalators. The flow of the crowd swept him into the outside lane. From behind the window of a surveillance booth, a woman was peering about her with suspicion. Screens divided the rolling stairs

into so many sections it always made him nervous. Don't stumble now. Ad panels advertising ad panels:

Space For Your Ad

Studies had shown that about four thousand steps a day were necessary to prevent high blood pressure, diabetes and all those other age-related ailments from having free rein over a body plagued by worsening circulation, worsening metabolism, worsening general health. The risk of premature death was lowest with a daily average of eight thousand steps. Speed, interestingly enough, seemed to have little impact. Even a saunter could prolong your life span – all those trips he made to a photocopier to fix a paper jam or update the software (following some unspoken agreement, all emails about recalcitrant printers landed in his inbox).

Braving the escalator with a bike was also a bad idea. It may have looked as though the left-hand side was reserved for people who preferred to walk, but actually this rule had to be renegotiated on every step, depending on the weight of people's rucksacks and their general temperament. There were no lifts, no stairs. If something went wrong down here, you were probably best climbing into the track bed and making your way to the next station, pressed up against the wall in a long line of people, following the emergency lights that glowed faintly in the darkness every few metres. He'd always wondered how steeply these tunnels sloped, given the widely varying depths of the stations. The trains on the dark-blue line wound their way up and down between street level and thirty, forty or even eighty metres below ground, and the other lines were the same – the red line and the purple one and both green lines, light and dark. Why didn't someone come up with a three-dimensional map of the metro? How else were you to know how long it took to be conveyed to the surface by escalator? He saw a row of

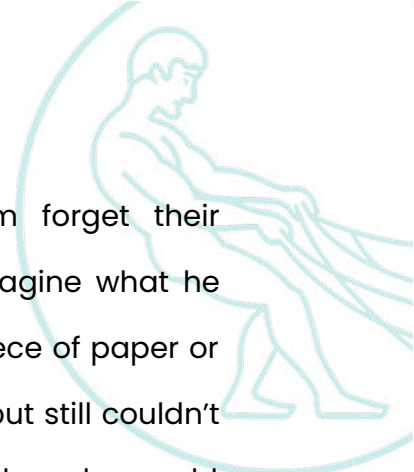


lamps, their light reflected on the steel. In front of him, a girl wearing a child's rucksack dipped her finger into the pools of light.

His sister's language development – unlike her development in other areas – had by and large been astonishingly normal, from her baby singsong to the first words of her own invention. He still remembered many of these: *Mastyá*, a mix of *Máma* and his nickname, *Kostya*, and *Lása*, when she wanted someone to butter her a slice of cucumber (for some reason, slices of buttered cucumber were, for a time, almost the only snack she didn't push away in disgust, her face averted as though you were putting God knows what on her plate). He remembered her outrage when no one understood the sounds she made, while at the same time, the range of words she used grew wider and wider: every day a new piece of the world was revealed. But there was also the phase – she must have been three or four – when, having learned to speak fluently, she had suddenly stopped finishing her sentences, had kept getting stuck and repeating cascades of word fragments, then abruptly moving on to another subject – as though she'd forgotten what she wanted to tell him, or as though some other topic in the backlog of words had turned out to be more important. To his relief, this phase hadn't lasted long – a few weeks, or maybe a month – but he still remembered the strain he'd felt in her presence, the fear that traces of his own earlier misuse of that mysterious synaptic machine might reemerge in his own speech – or that something he'd thought he was rid of might resurface in his sister. Luckily, his fears proved ungrounded; she later developed the habit of reciting whole passages from the TV guide, compulsively and with an astonishing capacity for memory – like an audio recorder, playing back recordings.

He'd been fourteen when he started going to see a speech therapist after school, a woman (why couldn't he remember her name?) whom he immediately got on with, as if it were the first time someone had really seen him, not just as the person he was but as the person he might, with a little help, become – although





the way she led the sessions sometimes almost made him forget their therapeutic nature. One of the exercises she set him was to imagine what he wanted to say word for word, as though he were writing it on a piece of paper or typing it on a keyboard (he would see the words in front of him but still couldn't get them out). Then there were the breathing techniques. During these he would stare at the sailing boat on her windowsill, a blue one-masted boat with a sail that matched the curtains. He'd particularly liked that matching fabric; it made everything she taught him melt effortlessly into a single image: a window onto the outside world and a boat that he launched on its way, its sails billowing.

He'd be interested to know what she thought of his recent struggles with his supposedly *safe language*, Russian. In the past it was only German that had tripped him up, *put a leg in his way*, as the Germans said – a phrase he and the speech therapist had agreed on, to take the pressure off him a bit, though she must have realised it was a trivialisation. He imagined that leg rammed between his in a sliding tackle even before he'd drawn breath and then kicking him as he fell, sending him stumbling from fall to fall. What he went through felt more like a volley of gunfire, a shooting spree in which he was shooter and victim rolled into one. Or, to put it a little less drastically, as his therapist would no doubt have advised him to do, as though someone or something were holding a door shut in front of him – a feeling of claustrophobia.

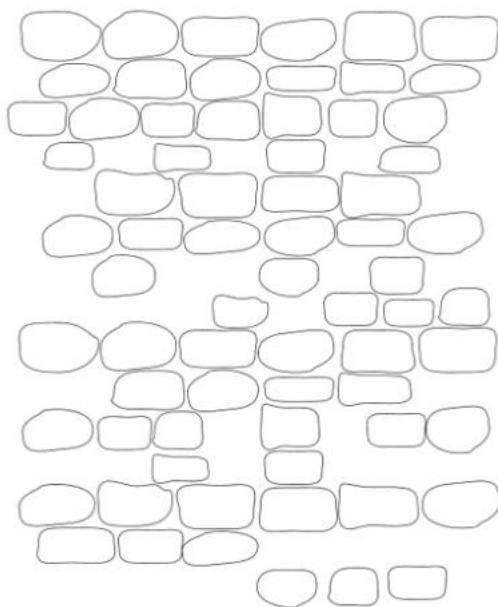
But even in her very first lesson (she also taught singing and had always spoken of *lessons*), he'd felt a knot begin to loosen, a kink that had been cutting him off from whole years of his life that he preferred not to think back to – those years of uncertainty when they'd had no idea where they would end up, where on this newly opened continent they would start afresh. Time after time he had started in a new class, not at the beginning of the school year but somewhere in the middle, when all bonds of friendship had already been formed, and it hadn't

helped that he was two heads taller than the others, for one thing because of the clothes – all that second-hand stuff he'd gone around in, not one pair of trousers that weren't bunched up at the waist with a belt, creating those hip bulges which, not for nothing, are part of the classic clown costume. His growth spurt couldn't have been more badly timed; he was always being asked how old he was. It felt as if something inside him were taking a stand against the back-classing that awaited all foreign children: you're not from here, you'd better repeat the year – as though getting your bearings in a new language wasn't easier among children your own age.

His speech therapist would probably say it depended on the context in which you used the language and how much stress you were under as a result. It made a difference whether he was talking Russian to his family or speaking to his boss – though what really did his head in were the patronymics. It was a curious custom, using your father's name to introduce yourself to strangers, hawking it around as though you were a kind of lifelong sales rep for your father. In his trouser pocket he kept a list on which he noted down people's names in full – *first name / patronymic / surname* – so as not to get too nervous before meeting them.

It had reached the point where it sometimes felt almost *unnatural* to put a thought into words – though there had been times when he would think he had said something that, in fact, he had only *thought*. It was the same with actions, like the other day when he'd been startled to notice that his colleague's radio was still on when he was sure he'd turned it off. He could remember turning it off, and yet he could clearly hear it: the same never-ending talk show, the same excitable voices. A prime example of the pointlessness of grinding out opinions – on climate change, for goodness' sake! As though methane bubbles weren't pushing their way to the surface as these people spoke, rising up from liquefying carcasses that had been locked away for millennia in the once-frozen, now thawing ground. He'd

seen pictures, photographs of enormous holes where the gases had gathered – gases that had exploded their way to the surface and were now converging. Before they escaped, these gases swelled the ground to a wobbly mass, which struck him as even more gruesome – that building pressure and no knowing when disaster would strike. It was even worse when you looked at which regions were melting and saw that sixty-five per cent of a country that wasn't exactly short on surface area was in the process of releasing its putrid gases. So gruesome that he sometimes felt, even here, that the ground might collapse beneath him, even if it was mainly old cobblestones, the bane of his life – of all road surfaces, cobbles had to be the worst, just the name, *Kopfsteinpflaster*, head-stone-paving (give him *брысчамка* any day), as though you were walking on skulls. Or jolting over them on a bike, which was hardly better. What madness to pave a whole square with them.



Once out of the metro station, he headed through Resurrection Gate. Every morning a resurrection – and indeed, if it wasn't cloudy, the sun often pointed an emphatic gold finger into the face of everyone coming from the north, as though

they'd been chosen to join the blessed and gain access to eternal life. On the round arch, a corona, and in the arch, a wrought-iron gate that was locked with an iron chain for major events and parades, and sometimes without apparent reason. In front of him, a cluster of slightly lost-looking (and rather tired-looking) tourists clutched paper cups emblazoned not with the green mermaid but with the mermaid's twin. Since Starbucks had morphed into Stars Coffee, Dr Oetker into Dr Bakers and Coca-Cola into Dobry Cola, the mermaid had a new crown – a perfect mix of *kokoshnik* and *budyenovka*.

Maybe they were looking for the Zero Kilometre, Konstantin thought, without glancing back – all the guidebooks mentioned it as an attraction, which was a gross exaggeration; it was just a metal plate that marked the point from which distances were measured (so much for the *centrality* of his office; it would have been good to know the elevation) – and at this point, a view opened up before him that really could be called an attraction, a view more sweeping than he was accustomed to in a city, not so much a *square* as an expanse the size of a landscape. He still hadn't got used to it, this totally flat surface evocative of a body of water, gleaming with the stony grey of a frozen lake or river. Here you could classify the clouds by shape and height. Today the sky looked like a gilled being with narrow slits in its smooth, silvery body and an up-thrusting fin; he felt as though it wasn't the surface of a sheet of ice he was walking on, but its underside – as though he and everyone else here were walking upside down in a reflection of the real

And of course, he'd imagined something different, when he turned up for that interview after entering a short description of himself in an online portal, outlining his ideal job and ticking the box that said he was prepared to relocate if the job required it: *flexible range of employment options in a dynamic working environment* (hmm), *including in an international context*.

He hadn't known then that the invitation was from his godfather – after all, the man could have got in touch with him by a more direct route and saved him a great deal of stress. The interview had been conducted by his godfather's assistant, not, as he had expected, in a conference room or the lobby but in a hotel bedroom, and he couldn't for the life of him remember what he'd said – he was glad to have spoken at all. His self-confidence wasn't great at the time and the set-up had only made him feel more nervous: the assistant was of a supernatural beauty not usually seen outside the pages of a magazine, and whichever way he turned, there was a mirror to show him what an idiot he looked, perched on a sofa that wasn't made for sitting on, his legs bent like a grasshopper's and as for his arms – even for a man as tall as he was, his arms were disproportionately long. He'd never have dreamed that Boris, Boris Bogdanov, still remembered him after all these years, still felt a *duty* to his *godson*. His friendship with Konstantin's parents might not, he confessed, have survived the decades, but his godfatherly duty filled him with pride (at this point, Konstantin's ears started to ring). Not for nothing, Boris explained, seated in a thronelike armchair next to his assistant – not for nothing was the Russian word for godfather *Christian Father*. And in retrospect, it didn't seem strange to Konstantin but *perfectly natural* that he had gone down on his knees, ears ringing, cheeks flushed, and kissed Boris Bogdanov's hand.

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