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*Dedicated to my daughters Anya and Nastya*

**Andrei Ananov**

# **TWO ACES IN THE BANK**

Concept of the book's design and its cover belong to *Andrei Ananov*

Designer *Azat Minnekayev*  
Editor of the Russian text *Natalya Sokolovskaya*

*Ananov A. Two Aces in the Bank*: An autobiographical novel  
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# INTRODUCTION

These biographical notes were unlikely to ever become public. And even though my life is quite an exciting affair, filled with numerous breathtaking adventures and remarkable events, but it is one thing to have lived through them and quite another – to describe them. To do this requires talent, or at least the simple habit of sitting down at a desk on a regular basis and putting down one's thoughts on paper. I have met a number of good storytellers over the course of my life, but frankly, most of them were incapable of writing down the things they had just spoken about with such eloquence.

Something occurred in my life, which encouraged me to write this book. It happened in the mid 1990s. I became fashionable at that time and was constantly accosted by journalists. Both in Russia and in the West a lot was being written about “the new Faberge” from St. Petersburg. I began to receive visits from film producers who offered to make a film about my life and work.

Since I am a professional artist and producer myself, and had a lot of practical experience working for the theatre and for the screen, I had a very good understanding of all the difficulties and problems involved in making a film. Apart from the issue of time, which is always scarce in my case, there were also two other major problems that producers who came to me with suggestions about the film would have had to resolve. Specifically, where would they find the funds for the film and what would the film be about, that is, what would the script be like.

As a matter of principle I have never spent a single penny on advertising: on newspaper or magazine articles, on photos of pieces of my jewelry in important international publications, or on radio and TV promotions...

First, I never had “the extra money”. I always used it for more essential things, such as buying precious stones and metals, and paying salaries to my employees.

Second, “buying” the media for me, who is, incidentally, a very vain person, would be equivalent to buying a woman's love. It would be a humiliation. It meant that anyone who paid for it received, in exchange, a flattering article or a beautiful woman. My self-esteem did not allow me to go that way.

I remember one episode that took place in 1992, in Italy. I had just received the Grand European Gold Medal for the objects of jewelry exhibited in celebration of the 500 anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. A good acquaintance

of mine, a Frenchman, who never parted with his film and video cameras, and who was busy taking pictures of celebrities present at the award ceremony, said to me:

“Hurry up, stand next to that actor over there. It is...” And he pronounced a name of a famous movie star. “I’ll take your picture.”

I smiled and told him:

“Never mind. I’ll wait for a time when others will consider it an honor to stand next to me.”



I waited several years, and that time finally came.

Several producers were offering their services in shooting a film about me and at my expense. And I immediately said “no way”. Apart from everything else, I never considered their suggestions to be serious. This went on until Misha Mikheyev, a gifted documentary filmmaker, appeared on the horizon. He won me over with two irrefutable arguments – his sweet personality and the fact that he had funds from the Goskino Film Studios, issued specifically in response to his request for funding of this project.

That way the issue of financing the film was resolved. Two other issues nevertheless remained – my deficit of time, entirely occupied by work, and the absence of a film script, or as producers call it, “a move”. When I raised this question, Mikheyev told me not to worry – he has an experienced scriptwriter.

The scriptwriter came to meet with me already the next day. He spent about ten minutes talking to me and solemnly assured me: “Everything’s clear.” He then pulled a pack of cards, like the ones you find at a library, out of his pocket. He laid them out on the table in a certain order, took off an imaginary cover and announced: “Here’s our film.”

His manipulations reminded me a few verses by Sergei Mikhalkov:

*Poet entrepreneur André  
In his bathroom bidet...*

As it turned out, the first card contained the film’s beginning: Andrei Ananov soars above St. Petersburg in a balloon...

Incidentally, the scriptwriter’s name corresponded amazingly well with his “produce”. When he told me the content of several others of his “cakes”, I said:

“That’s enough, Pirozhkov, you can go now.” (The name “Pirozhkov” is derived from the Russian word “pirozhok” or “pirog”, which means “cake” or “pie”. – *Translator’s Note.*)

Insulted, the scriptwriter collected his game of cards and, barely looking back at me on his way out, said casually:

“Do the writing yourself then.”

I didn’t say anything but accepted the challenge.



Prior to that I had never written anything in my entire life, except for the compositions required at the University entrance exams and the long letters I wrote to my first wife. True enough, I had to write a script for the theatre based on Vladimir Shukshin’s novel “Brother Mine”. But this was totally different kind of work, where there was not a single word of my own, since the text was fully based on a wonderful piece of fiction.

At that time I had to fly to Paris once every two weeks. I spent three hours in the air in complete solitude, where nothing disturbed me and the phone never rang. The hours seemed to drag endlessly.

During one such flight I made up my mind. I ripped apart a white hygienic packet, since there was no other paper close at hand, and I began writing. I did not know exactly what I was writing – a script, a story from life, or a series of recollections. The only thing I was sure about was the mood, so to say, the melody, of my penmanship. And something else – I knew exactly what I was writing about, and for what purpose.

In one breath, on my way to Paris, I wrote the story titled “Search”, which became one of the chapters in this book, and on the way back I wrote my childhood memories.

When I arrived in St. Petersburg I invited Mikheyev and Pirozhkov, asked them to sit down in the living room and read out loud what I had written.

After a brief pause, Pirozhkov left, commenting sadly: “You don’t need me.”

While Mikheyev rose and said: “The first day of the shooting is tomorrow.”

This is how the film “My Dad Said to Me...” appeared, shot by Mikheyev with great discreetness, after he perceptively detected the tonality and music of my presentation during that very first evening. The titles said: “Based on a book by A. Ananov.”

In reality there was no book at that time. It was to be written at some future date. And this took two more years. I wrote it in spurts and bounds, on the plane, rarely at home, in the short intervals between different projects.

I could have spent endless hours working on it, because my life consists of an endless sequence of curious events, some of which are not destined to appear in writing at this point.

However, everything should have an end. That is why I put a dot after I finished writing what you have just read, my dear readers.

Though maybe I meant it to be a dotted line ... not a dot.

## **AN EVENT ON THE HIGHWAY**

It was at the break of dawn. There was an irritating, monotonous drizzle outside, and the windshield was fogging up all the time. But it was warm and cozy inside the car, and music was playing softly.

There were two people in the car, a man and a woman. Both were silent, the rain was drumming against the glass, the windshield wipers were making a scratching noise and Joe Dassen was singing. They were happy.

The skyline of Tallinn was already quite visible in the distance. The bulky profile of the Viru Hotel was a helpful point of reference for the driver. They had a good suite reserved for them, with a king-sized bed, a hot bath and 24 hours of love and oblivion.

Several silhouettes were vaguely visible on the roadside. Two young men, who looked eighteen or possibly nineteen, waved their hands in desperation, hoping against hope for a lift. They were soaking wet, shivering and miserable. The driver hit the brakes.

The young men pushed their way into the back seat, and closed the door. The driver started the engine.

Music was playing softly. No one uttered a single word. There was no “thank you”, no mention of an address, where they needed to go, no question about the destination of the two in the car, the man of about thirty and the young girl, slim and graceful, who was sitting next to him.

Suddenly, he heard the recognizable sounds of guzzling coming from the back seat. The smell of cheap port filled the air. The rear window opened, and a bottle broke into smithereens as it hit against the asphalt road. There was a click of a lighter, and the heavy smell of cheap cigarettes drifted across toward the driver’s seat.

“First thing you should have said ‘hullo’. Next, you should have asked permission before lapping it up. And third, throw out your weed and take my ‘Marlboro’.” Without turning his head, he offered them his pack.

One of the men in the back giggled.

“Drive, maestro,” a voice with a strong Estonian accent ordered curtly, and a hand slapped a ten-ruble bill on the driver’s forehead.

The brakes screeched. The car came to a sharp halt on the dark highway. The driver got out swiftly, pulling a heavy club from under the seat.

“Out, both of you,” he demanded curtly. The enraged expression on his face seemed to speak for itself.

The passengers shut the back door knobs with a click.

Bending over across the driver’s seat, he grabbed the man closest to him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him towards himself, trying to drag him out of the car.

He suddenly felt something long and thin hitting him in the stomach.

The club made a circle in the air, passed right next to the attacker’s head and crushed his shoulder blade.

The second man had already jumped out of the car. Something long and thin pierced his stomach once again. And again the driver’s sole defense – the club – soared above the man’s head and, luckily for him, landed flat on its side. The attacker yelled with pain, pressing his ripped ear to his head. There was a crackling sound as the two disappeared into the bushes.

(Ironically, they will all soon find themselves in the same hospital, only the other two - it turned out that they were on the wanted list – will be behind bars, while he will be lying by the window in a room he shared with other patients.)

The driver got behind the wheel, not yet himself after the intense heat of the fighting, not yet aware of the pain, his heart pushing his thick blood with effort. It felt as if his blood was boiling from the adrenalin rush.

Once he had calmed down a little, he thrust his hand under his shirt. His fingers sank into something warm and sticky.

With her eyes shiny from fear, his horrified companion stared at the blood-covered hand, which was gripping the wheel.

Blood was oozing down his leg and onto the rubber floor mat. Half of the mat had soaked through by the time they got to the hotel.

The driver walked up the stairs of the Viru Hotel, entered the hall and fainted.



He was dying by the window, in the far corner of the enormous hospital ward.

The bright moon shed its neon light upon the back of the bed, the nightstand, the carafe close within his reach, and the white hospital chair with a robe hanging from it. One of its sleeves was turned oddly upwards, like the arm of a drowning man.

All these objects created long shadows, and as soon as he closed his eyes they would instantly turn into fantastic, ugly and menacing figures, the fruit of his feverish imagination.

The nightstand transformed into a huge steel monster, and it moved towards him with a frightening rumbling sound and then crushed him. The carafe grew to a gigantic size; its sides covered with large cracks and finally collapsed. There was a loud sound of breaking glass, and, glittering with its broken tooth-like shards, the carafe opened its double-edged sharp jaws wider and wider, as if it intended to carve up and devour the man who was lying on the bed in the corner of the room.

He forced himself out of his confusion with difficulty, opened his eyes with a great effort of will, and the objects instantly acquired their normal shapes. His eyes closed shut again, refusing to obey him, and the nightmare continued.

He had long since ripped off the string of the bell, which was no longer useful. The nurse who came in response to his call only once before, said impassively, with a pronounced Estonian accent:

“The dokhtoo did not tell to give inchection, you must sleep to moornin.”

She did not come again.

He lay there all of Saturday, Saturday night, all of Sunday, and now, on Sunday night, he was dying, as it turned out later, from peritonitis. All the doctors but one had their time off. The only physician who was on duty failed to understand that the small incisions in his stomach made with a thin long blade went all the way to his inflamed, slashed intestines.

“The dokhtoo did not tell to give inchection...”

“Take my money, you bitch, there’s two thousand there...”

“The dokhtoo did not tell...”



The man on the bed next to his, also an Estonian, mumbled something in his hissing voice, clearly unhappy to be awakened by the groans of the man, whose was dying from unbearable pain.

“You bastard...” the wounded man gritted his teeth.

End of story.



A number of times already he had dived into a fluid nightmarish delirium, feeling over and over again the wild animal fear that paralyzed his entire body and brain, a fear which cannot be described and living through which is probably close to surviving one's own death.

“I will not get out of this nightmare, not a chance,” he thought with dread. His entire life, or, rather, only its best, most pleasant and fuzzy part, rushed through his mind with a screeching sound, like the noise made by a rewinding film. For one brief second he stopped fearing death – he realized that he had seen a lot and experienced a lot. And he had his moments of happiness.

He closed his eyes, but in place of the expected nightmare, he suddenly felt the light touch of somebody's dry and pleasant hand on his damp forehead.

Then all of this disappeared somewhere.

The moon was no longer shining.

He was dead.

Darkness descended upon him. Cutting through this darkness with remarkable speed, in impossible directions, from above, from down below, from the sides and from somewhere else, came blinding rays of light, like falling stars.

Then he saw a narrow beam of light from far away, as if someone had opened the door at the end of the hallway in his old apartment on Liteiny Avenue, in Leningrad.

“To the operating room, at once,” a voice said.



Quiet angels were rustling beside him barely audibly. He counted six of them. He lay in the middle of a large hall, all dressed in white, and the hall was also white, both the walls and the ceilings.

There was neither the pain, nor the fear, nor the nightmarish delirium. There was nothing. It was as if he was floating in a warm bathtub, blissfully high and lightheaded, enjoying the feeling he remembered from his childhood, when his mother poured cool water from a metal tub over his small naked body right after he, a little boy, got out the scorching hot steam bath.

Years later, as an adult, he was never able to experience the same feeling of exhilaration, when he took a cold shower after getting out of the sauna. Even though he seemed to remember the exact temperature since childhood, he could never set it right, no matter how hard he tried. The blissful feeling couldn't be recovered.

He recovered it now, in the quiet, virgin-white hall, as if in heavens, filled with the rustling of angels' wings.

He woke up in the intensive care unit.



The name of the haggard, unshaven man in a clean hospital robe, who had just returned from behind the great divide, after experiencing clinical death, which lasted for over two minutes, was Andrei Ananov. He was thirty-two years old; he had seen a lot and had gone through a lot in his lifetime; he took chances and enjoyed risking it all, and he loved this kind of life. He immediately wanted some Champaign and a good cigarette.

The young nurse, one of the six whom he had mistaken for angels a short while ago, blushed and furtively handed him over a cigarette from his handsome pack of Marlboros.

"You are not allowed Champaign."

He inhaled greedily, and felt dizzy and nauseous.

"I'll give you an injection, and you will fall asleep," said the nurse, and she gently – with professionalism and before he could become aware of it – injected the contents of a small syringe.

A powerful warm wave covered him from head to toe, and he flew into a blank void once again.

Then he came to and spent another four unforgettable days in the IC unit of the emergency hospital in Tallinn, a recently built facility, brand new, clean and tidy. On the seventh day after his serious extensive surgery he made love to the young, easily blushing nurse, who he would remember for the rest of his life, even though he could not recall her name. And on the tenth day the young nurse saw him off with flowers to the reception area, where his wife, a beautiful faithful woman with beautiful pure eyes sat waiting for him, holding a bouquet of flowers.

“We’ll spend the night at Viru, you’ll get some rest, and tomorrow I’ll help you and we’ll take the flight to Leningrad. You can get the car later.”

Unsteady on his feet, still not quite himself and having lost twenty-five pounds, he put his arms around her shoulders and said:

“We will have dinner at the Variety Restaurant, you’ll fly home tomorrow, while I’ll drive to Riga.”



His wife gave a sigh. She knew that no matter what she said, he would do things his own way.

The stitches hardly bothered him at all, held in place with a broad supportive bandage tightened under his shirt. Only the lower part of the suture was somewhat painful in the place where it parted slightly during that night of lovemaking with the young nurse, in her girlishly tidy room at the hospital.

In the morning he was on his way to Riga. Life went on.

He drove unhurriedly and thought about the recent events, about his crazy life, about the nurse, about his unbelievably good fortune, about his dad who had died not long ago, about his friends waiting for him in Riga, about his sad and yet happy life. He decided it would be a good thing to write a book about all of this some day.

But these were his plans for some day later. He had no time now. All he wanted now was simply to live.

## SEARCH

Everything was calculated well in advance, to the minutest details.

There would be a knock at the door. Actually, first the bell would start ringing. But it would be the kind of ringing intended for everyone, for the others. His friends knew the place of the secret button for the other bell. And anyway, he didn’t have that many friends and they didn’t come that often. So the sound of the other bell ringing was in itself quite alarming.

If the (other) bell rang timidly, briefly, it most likely meant that someone had just made a mistake and was looking for another apartment. When the cops rang at the door, it was a different kind of ringing, long and self-confident, as if they were masters of the house.

Then he and his wife had to hold their breath. Without making any sound, they would make sure that the heavy velvet drapes on the windows were drawn together. The drapes didn't let the light of day into the room and prevented electric light from being visible from outside. They were a rare kind that faded from the sun on both sides.

I could turn off the light just in case and peep through the narrow gap between the drapes. A person who enters the house without hiding will leave the house the same way. I can recognize him, or remember him, or call him out of the window.

If someone had made a mistake and was looking for another apartment, he would leave after ringing once or twice. Only cops, thieves and burglars (who are all the same), or employees of the housing management – plumbers and electricians – ring the bell for a long time. However, these latter guys have no business coming to our apartment, since the owner knows how to fix everything on his own. There was one occasion when I needed to install a new modern Compact toilet bowl exported from Sweden, and every plumber I invited to do the job insisted it was impossible. They all said that this couldn't be done because of the small size of the bathroom, and because the suction pipe was attached to the drain in an unusual way. The toilet bowl spent a year on the balcony. Finally, the plumber from the housing management promised to take care of it, and he was allowed into the apartment. He removed the old toilet bowl in no time, put his arms around it, as if it were a child, and carried it out of the apartment, promising to come back immediately with a metal part he couldn't do without. He was gone for two days. At first we suffered in silence, then we asked the neighbors to let us use their bathroom, but on the third day I lost my patience. I brought the toilet bowl in from the balcony, tried it on, thought a little, and made a flexible and elastic connection out of an old car tube, in which I inserted a steel spring with a special spiral. I finished the job in one hour, and eleven years later we are still using this Compact toilet bowl, and we have no problems with flow control.

To make a long story short, we don't need electricians and plumbers or experts in gas stoves. We do not use gas. We have an electric oven. As for thieves, that's another story. But they are not so difficult to deal with.

We don't have any more thieves around who live by a set of "thieves' laws", true professionals who could pick any lock with a woman's hairpin, safe-breakers who needed no more than five minutes to open any safe, even the most complicated system, with a skeleton key. There is just one such expert safebreaker left, a guy by the name of Dubovik, an old-timer at the KGB. He has a long record of breaking strong boxes in people's homes during searches, without causing any damage to their contents. But he is a very finicky character; he also has poor health and drinks too much. If it hadn't been for this, he would have been priceless.

Thieves exhibit far less professionalism nowadays, as do their catchers, the cops. Both sides act in a rude, obnoxious manner: the first use crowbars to break down people's doors, while the second use clubs to coerce evidence out of people. In other words, one side is no better than the other.

However, my door can't be broken with a crowbar. It is made of steel and is encased in a steel box. It can only be ripped apart with explosives. The locks, too, are made with great ingenuity. They are as simple as an orange, and yet their simplicity hides a number of surprises.

We keep a pneumatic gun, a stunning device, always ready for use inside by the entrance door. Let us say, you arrive at home, approach the entrance door, and suddenly – you feel a gun barrel pressing against your back: “Quiet, don't make any noise, open the door, now!” In that case, you start by opening the first door with a key, and while you are busy opening the inside door, you can do a trick. Swiftly getting on your haunches, you can give your guest an electric shock. This will send him flying seven feet or so. You can then release some gas at him for stronger effect, and shut the door.

Here's the difference between thieves and bandits: a thief will try to pay you a visit in your absence, whereas a bandit wants you, the owner, to be present. Thieves rummage in your things looking for valuables, whereas bandits drink coffee and wait for you to bring everything yourself – with a soldering iron in your anal groove.

A bandit can try to enter your house in the light of day disguised as your mailman. They can kidnap your child – if the child is playing in the yard with no adult supervision – so that they can later demand ransom. I have something special to greet these uninvited visitors – a double-barrel hunting rifle loaded with bullets large enough to kill a bear, always ready for use, with an official registration number. I recently enhanced my “reception” by a “PM” revolver, which I received with the personal endorsement of the Minister of Internal Affairs.

So should anything happen, I am a hot-blooded guy, and racing gave me an instantaneous reaction. Don't come anywhere near, you might end up with a bullet in your head, bandits.

The profession of an underground jeweler teaches one to be neat. Every single thing should be in its place, in little boxes and drawers, compactly, so that it is all within easy reach. This is more convenient both in terms of work and in case of a search. Because impounding inevitably follows a search, so each little box should be numbered to make it easier to do an inventory. There, at the KGB, they will then investigate what lies in this box and that, and they may even return the things without disrupting anything.

It's upsetting actually... All my life I collected, finished and cut small stones. I bought and procured (actually, an untranslatable Russian word is used, which means buying something that is not being sold anywhere) tools, various kinds of tiny borers, drills and cutters.

Remains and bits of gold and silver had to be placed separately, each strictly in accordance with its degree of purity. And there had to be absolute proof that it was

purchased in a store and not stolen from a factory or melted down from industrial metal. This always entailed a serious penalty according to article 88 – from six to fifteen years in jail, and even death penalty if the offense involved particularly high amounts. Actually no one ever knew what these particularly high amounts really were.

Some say, over ten thousand (in 1993 prices - *author's remark*), others say, over a hundred thousand. Only the prosecutor knows the exact amount – it always depends on his mood.

Diamonds are a totally different matter. If we are talking about “bare” stones, i.e., stones without a setting, they can stretch it to article 88: bare stones are the equivalent of currency. However, a stone in a setting is a piece of jewelry. You cannot get article 88 for that one.

If you work from home, getting orders from clients and using their personal materials, gold and silver, you end up with the lightest punishment – the article for unlawful business activities. You can be given a maximum of three years for that. This would be the worst-case scenario. Before that you would be reprimanded, fined or receive a conditional sentence. But whatever the case may be, they would always confiscate the tools used in the unlawful business activities. That is why the tools and materials should always be in their respective places and should look neat. Whereas you, the underground jeweler, should be prepared for the worst every minute of your life, every hour, be it day or night.



My dad, an intelligent and remarkably honest man, who had not deceived a single person in his entire life and in some odd way managed to combine profound scientific insight with a childish naïve faith in goodness, said memorable things to me once in a while. He was at the frontline from the beginning to the end of World War II as a senior sergeant and became a professor of math once the war was over. Here is one of his phrases: “The meaning of life is to wait and hope.” Here is another: “Life never forgets to close one door before it opens another.” And: “Better to die standing than to live on your knees.” This is exactly how he died. Standing. He jumped from the rooftop of an eleven-floor building and landed on his feet on the concrete slab above the entrance. Probably in his other life he will never experience the kind of glaring injustice, which pushed him to the edge.



I decided that it was better to die standing. Or, rather, sitting. Sitting at the jeweler's workbench. I always had a clear conscience. I never pocketed a single piece of gold my clients gave me. In the rest of the world, jewelers were respected; under our Soviet system, they were jailed. So what, I thought to myself, this is not my problem. This is the problem of the system. Then I did some simple arithmetic. At that time I was still working as a producer at a drama theatre. My salary was a hundred-fifty rubles a month.

With this kind of money it was possible to make ends meet somehow, putting aside ten or twenty rubles for your dream car.

The price of a car in those years was about seven and a half thousand rubles. It appeared that with these kinds of savings, one could realistically hope to be able to purchase a car in thirty years.

If I spent my evenings, nights and weekends making jewelry, I could make as much as five thousand rubles. This meant sixty thousand a year. A hundred and eighty thousand in three years. In other words, my three years in jail were well worth it. And I would have a clear conscience. Most important, I love this work. I make people happy. I am as free as a bird— no artistic councils, no district or regional communist party committee. And representatives of the proletariat won't be casting their votes to tell you what your piece of jewelry should look like, they won't be speaking out like that worker from the Kirov Plant did at the artistic council at the theater. A guy who knows only one language fluently – swearing – will no longer be telling you how to produce plays or make earrings. And finally, I would be able to buy the coveted leather jacket and a pair of jeans, and I would come to the theatre wearing these things, making everybody salivate with jealousy. True, it is better to die standing! But I must try to stay alive.

We walked out of the house and got into the car, but we didn't have time to leave. The moment I started the engine, my wife said: "Look at these cops. I bet they're on their way to pick up someone." And then I saw a black Volga slowly rolling into our yard. I saw it, and felt adrenalin rushing into my blood flow. I am well familiar with this feeling. It comes in anticipation of a struggle – the utmost mobilization of the body's entire strength. I used to feel it when I made sharp turns, on ice, or on the slippery track under the rain. The racecar was ready to lose control, and my only hope was for the engine to have a small reserve of power, or for the brakes not be pressed to the limit. If that's not the case, the car will skid, roll into the gutter and you'll be thrown away from the finish line. You'll then be in the rear, following those who are now behind you, breathing heavily at your bumper.

I continued slowly on my way. The three men in plain clothes, who were sitting in the Volga, suddenly noticed me and brought the car to a halt, blocking the exit from the yard. One of them opened the side window and asked (with deliberate politeness):

"Are you Andrei Grigorievich?"

That was that. The finale. My wife with her animal instinct was right. Thoughts, one more pessimistic than the other, flashed through my mind with lightening speed, much faster than "wind forward" on my video. One of them was: "It's probably the KGB." The keys to the apartment are on the key chain with all the other keys, trapped in the ignition lock. There are fifty carats of small diamonds smuggled from Israel in the house – a criminal violation. Article 88... No way out... No way out... No way out... I must put up

a fight... Think of something... It's never too late to surrender... There's nowhere to run... I must outsmart them... But how?.. I must....

I got out of the car. The plainclothesman got out of his.

He introduced himself. Showed me his credentials. A KGB major from the Odessa Region. Why from Odessa? Why not locals?

"We'd like to see your apartment, Andrei Georgievich.

I tried to clutch at a straw:

"Why? What right do you have? I heard that in such instances you should produce a sanction for the search..."

The major instantly lost his calm.

"Get into the car, now."

I did. It's the end, I thought. I'll never get out of this car alive. But they are not calling my wife. She too has keys to the apartment. She's smart. She'll think of something. In the car the major produced a paper from his briefcase: "Ruling on performing the confiscation..."

"Wait a minute, but the signature here is not by the prosecutor. The signature is by the prosecutorial investigator."

"I'll now take you to the district police station. There they will carry out a personal search and confiscate the keys to your apartment. That's all. I won't need you after that. We will do fine just with a couple of witnesses."

"So why do they always write about the sanction by the prosecutor?"

"It's necessary for the police. You are with the KGB. We also have the right to make independent decisions in emergency situations. Including break in and shooting to neutralize the offender. Understand?"

I understood. I understood things very fast. In general, I am a quick learner. But this was the first time, an extraordinary situation. It occurred to me that I shouldn't antagonize them. I should resolve it peacefully. This would be the first scene of a show, which I was going to produce and in which I was to play the main part. After all, I was a professional. An actor and a producer. Damn it, was it for nothing that I received an education and the government spent all this money on me?

"Sorry Major, Sir. You should understand me, it's my first time, see. Sure, let's go."



“I like it better that way,” the Major gave me another of his smiles. He was a slightly overweight, short guy my age or possibly even younger.

“Do you have any neighbors on this floor. We need witnesses.”

“Please don’t invite my neighbors! I’m embarrassed. Can’t you ask passers bye?”

“All right.” The major was appeased. He asked his assistant to bring several random passers bye, and two of them shortly came over.

“Let’s go. Wait, where’s your wife?”

I glanced in the direction of the car. There was nobody. My wife was slowly walking away and was already fairly far away. (The policemen will later express their admiration for her self-control.)

They caught up with my wife and brought her back. She walked towards us just as slowly, as if she were trying to give me more time to orchestrate the event.

But I did not need any extra time. The moment when I said sincerely (with the utmost sincerity!) “Sorry Major, Sir,” I already had a plan of action. Not the whole plan, but definitely the first act of the play.

Seven people walked through the entrance door. The curtain was raised.



I was the first to enter the apartment. The major followed me. Then came my wife. The two other KGB men and the two witnesses made up the rear. We entered the tiny foyer, which is where I had my desk. It was not a desk actually but a secretary with a drop front, which, when lowered, served as my work desk. To the left of the secretary, about four feet away, was the door to the toilet, to the right was the room entrance. Between the two was the entrance to the kitchen.

In this secretary, on its shelves and in the lower compartment, I kept my most precious possessions, which I had collected and accumulated over the years – my instruments, my little jewel boxes and cases, my gadgets, books on the art of jewelry, and a multitude of other items that were valuable and significant, possibly, to their owner alone.

In that same secretary, next to the instruments, screwdrivers and forceps was that ill-fated small can from drawing slates, in which my 88 article was hiding like a jinni in a bottle, rolled up into a tight spiral. It was fifty karats of small “bare” diamonds, contraband – my choice between freedom and incarceration.

One bastard, clearly the one who sold me out, gave them to me recently in lieu of payment for my work. He sold me out knowing full well that I wouldn’t be able to get

away with it. How could I? I had jewelry-making tools and “bare” diamonds in my house; I was sufficiently well known as a jeweler, and besides – and this was the most important thing – this bastard had taken all his “goods” from me a long time ago.

I had worked for him for a short while, but then I quit after I realized that this contact reeked of criminal activity. I rejected a profitable job, but could not refuse the offer of small diamonds. Some people would view them as evidence, contraband and currency, but I thought of them as material for my work, without which I was unable to create a subtle, delicate and unique piece. And now this small can, this remote control mine was going to explode. The time mechanism was set, and it was ticking inside my temples.

“The things you are looking for are right here,” I said as I pointed to the secretary.

The mind of the KGB officer, as I visualized it, had to register my admission as disinformation. There is the reason why Stanislavsky wrote: “When acting an evil man on stage, try to find the side of him that is good.” If this were to be translated into police jargon it would mean: when you are being shown something, look for it in places that are not shown to you.

This was what I counted on. If I played correctly in the first act, I could get a short period of relief, and the time mechanism would tick for a little longer. During this time I would have to play out the second act.

“Never mind. We’ll leave this one for dessert.” The major smiled at me meaningfully as if to say, “I know the likes of you all too well, you crooks.” And he walked away from the secretary, into the kitchen.

The other KGB officer methodically started to search the room. The third checked the foyer and the coat rack.

The witnesses were getting in their way.

My wife was sitting in an armchair, watching what was happening in silence.

I was in the kitchen making myself some coffee. I offered some to the major. He refused. I was making the coffee and thinking to myself: “I will at least have some coffee before they take me away.”

The major searched the kitchen slowly, discretely (or so it seemed to him) observing my response. He pored out the sugar, fumbled in the flour and examined the little containers with spices.

I drank my coffee and tried to solve a producer’s problem – how could I justify opening the secretary?

There is such a concept in the theater – justifying the transfer to another acting area. For instance, if an actor who is engaged in a dialogue on the stage, suddenly jumps to his feet, runs to the corner and comes back with a button which he found on the floor, it will be perfectly clear to the audience: the man lost a button, he suddenly saw it on the floor and ran to pick it up.

This is exactly what “justifying the transfer” means.

I sat in the kitchen and tormented myself, looking for a pretext, which would allow me to open the secretary. I was trying to find a way to justify this action.

The time mechanism inside me was ticking louder and louder.

The major was about to finish searching the kitchen.

I suddenly asked his permission to use the toilet. (An idea struck me, I must admit. However, it was so complicated that I doubted I could succeed. But I couldn’t delay trying any further.)

When he heard my request, the major was alerted. He pricked up his ears like a German Shepard. He could smell the prey.

He started by searching me thoroughly. Then, after giving it a thought, he asked me to bring the clothes I usually wear at home. He searched my sport outfit, and told me to change into it. He rolled the clothes I took off into a bundle in order to search them still more thoroughly once he’s back at the KGB offices. Then we went to the toilet together. He looked into every nook and cranny, and even pulled out all the loose pieces of board and plywood, which I kept behind the toilet bowl just in case as a good handyman. He also got out the cleaning brush and carefully studied it.

I stood behind him. The ticking inside of me was gone, replaced by rattling, booming, clanging and banging. I was approaching the culminating point of my performance. Now I had to do a good job bringing the scene to its finale, to its pivotal event. My legendary Swiss-made Contact toilet bowl with a swan on the handle was to become the centerpiece of this event. Actually, not even the entire Compact but just its handle, or, to be more precise, the tiny screw with which the handle was attached to the axis. The thing is that the only way one can take apart the Compact is by detaching this screw. And to do this, one needs a screwdriver. The major surely did not have a screwdriver on him. He had a revolver and he had an ID, but a screwdriver – that he didn’t have. And this is how it ought to be. Imagine how many screwdrivers would have to be manufactured for every major to carry along a screwdriver! The major eyed the snow-white Compact thoughtfully. It was clear that he realized that this was the only object here, which he hadn’t examined. Either he was too lazy to bother or else he didn’t know how to take it apart.

Losing hope I dared to provoke him: “So, can I go ahead already?”

The major made up his mind. “Tell me how this thing can be dismantled?”

I pretended to be taken aback.

The major insisted.

I “gave in”: “There’s a small screw in the handle. It has to be loosened. Then you can take everything apart like a Christmas tree.”

“Unscrew it.”

My words of gratitude to Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavsky and to Izakin Abramovich Greenshpun. They taught me how to “justify the transfer”. While I was talking to the major and making eye contact, I dropped the front of the secretary and blindly, relying on memory and intuition, I found the little box and held it tightly in the palm of my hand. I fumbled blindly for the screwdriver with the same hand. Then I loosened the screw.

The major bent over the toilet bowl.

I lowered the little box into the pocket of my sport outfit, which had already been searched.

The performance was getting close to its finale. I will soon be bowing to the applauding audience. But I had misjudged the situation. As it soon became clear, the bowing ceremony wouldn’t be coming any time soon.

It was finally time for the “dessert”. The major and two of his assistants started to examine the contents of the secretary.

Little boxes, parcels, packages, and cans emerged in the light of day, taken out of its depths. Now I found myself playing the part of a guide, explaining what was what, demonstrating my tools and instruments, bragging about my genuine antique gold file from the Faberge workshops. The major was going to climb up, trying to reach the upper shelf where I kept my acids.

“Don’t do that,” I cautioned him, “or you’ll end up with a hole in your slacks.”

The major followed my advice.

It was quite obvious that my inner confidence (and I was in fact confident that there was no more evidence of “criminal activity” in the secretary) had been transmitted to my visitors. They seemed to have consoled themselves that their search had failed, and they were simply completing the prescribed formalities.

Before long, the entire surface of the drop-down desk was covered with numerous objects. At that point the major decided that they should all be moved to the dining table in the living room, where I was supposed to name the objects, which were being examined and confiscated, whereas he would write their descriptions down in his list. We sat down amicably at the table. I began to pass on to him various jewelry articles, one by one, naming them, and he jotted down their names.

Suddenly I saw two tiny parts of something in one of the little boxes, in which I kept bits of gold intended for re-melting. I had made them at the request of the bastard who sold me out, and these two little pieces could later become evidence of my connection to him. I would hate this to happen.

There was a gold bar weighing a little under an ounce lying in the box together with the two parts. I would hate to lose it.

I asked my wife for some soup.

She was quite astonished and said: "Wait a bit. You can eat later."

"Later will be too late. They won't feed us there tonight. We won't be scheduled for a meal."

"What are you talking about?" my wife was perplexed. "Are they going to take us away?"

"And what were you thinking?"

"It's a pleasure to deal with such an intelligent man," the major summed up.

My wife brought me a bowl of borsht and a slice of bread. I placed the bread next to the little box with the two parts and the gold bar.

I ate the borsht and continued to name the objects that were being confiscated.

I took the bread in my hand, bit off a piece and placed the rest next to the box.

I took the bread, bit off a piece and placed it in the same spot.

The repetitive movement of my hand was monotonous. It did not raise any suspicion. So when, instead of taking the bread, I took the two parts out of the box and put them into my mouth, nobody paid any attention.

I then transferred the parts from my mouth into the spoon, and from the spoon into the bowl. It disappeared into the borsht. I was so emboldened by my trick that I proceeded to

“eat” the bar of gold in the same fashion. Before long, it also found itself at the bottom of the bowl.

My grandfather taught my father to leave nothing on his plate. He was supposed to eat everything to the last crumb. My father passed this rule on to me. My wife knew my habits. For some reason I didn’t finish my meal, which never happened before. I pushed away the bowl with the “gold borsht” and said curtly: “ Take it away.” My smart wife didn’t pour out the remainder of the soup. She placed the bowl in the kitchen and covered it with a lid.

Two days later, when they let me out and I came back home, the borsht had gone sour, of course.

But as you know gold does not spoil in soup.

Flight St. Petersburg – Paris, 1993

## **RECOLLECTIONS ABOARD THE PLANE**

A little boy of about ten years old is sitting in the dark on the windowsill of the attic window. He is eating a pastry, a sugar-crust waffle roll filled with cream, worth two rubles and twenty kopecks a piece in 1955 prices. The pastry was delicious. The boy ate it and was consumed with guilt.

His parents and Faina Vasilievna, the housekeeper, were at home waiting for him. They surrounded the little boy with an atmosphere of love, friendship and kindness. From an early age he was taught to share everything he had (oh, this Soviet tradition, which insisted that everything had to be shared!).

He got the two rubles and twenty kopecks in some miraculous way that can’t be explained now. History has not kept for posterity the source of this money, an amount quite astronomical for the boy at the time.

Having obtained this sum of money, the boy went to a large, well-lit store, bought his favorite pastry and ran home with the intention of dividing it fairly. But he never got there. The temptation was too great: the pastry was so small, it had such a wonderful smell, and he knew he would get the tiniest piece after sharing it with the others.

So now the little boy is sitting in the darkness and eating the pastry all alone. The pastry is delicious, but the boy is being consumed with guilt. This feeling of guilt will stay with

him for years, and even though he will later sometimes do things that would truly make him blush with shame, this windowsill in the attic and the sugar-crusted waffle roll for two rubles and twenty kopecks – his first act of dishonesty – will remain with him for the rest of his life.



One French magazine wrote this about me: “His father was a mathematician, and his mother came from the Russian nobility.” It sounds like an old joke: the older son was an intelligent lad and the younger – a soccer player.

Actually, my father was also “from the Russian nobility”. And he was a mathematician. My mother was from the nobility, but she was also a scientist – a geologist and a geomorphologist. She studied the history of the Earth’s evolution, researching ancient flora, pollen and spores of early plants.

My father was honest and reliable like a Swiss bank. If he gave his word, nothing could ever sway him. He had a splendid education; he was intelligent but he was also childishly naïve. He trusted anyone who wanted to borrow money from him. If the person did not pay back his debt, my father was very much amazed. But if this person wanted to borrow money from him again, he would never refuse.

My father never belonged to the young pioneer organization – fortunately for him this communist-style organization for the young was established later. He never was a member of the young communist league (I don’t know why), and he never was a communist (I know why). He was simply a decent, honest man. He fought honestly during the war. He fought for his country, for my mother and me. I never heard him say that he fought for Stalin or for communism.

My grandmother on my mother’s side died in nineteen thirty-eight in the Gulag. Her only crime consisted in the fact that she spoke four foreign languages, played the piano, had a good voice and called the director of the village school where she worked as a teacher, a fool. The director turned out to be not just a fool but also a member of the communist party, and he reported her to the authorities.

I know next to nothing about my grandfather on my mother’s side, since he died very early. I can see from photographs that he was handsome, and I was told that he was quite a gambler – he lost his family estate and a horse-breeding factory playing roulette in Monte-Carlo, but he later supposedly pawned his diamond ring and won everything back.

The ring as well as the Seal of Nobility miraculously survived to this day. I always wear this diamond ring when I travel to Monte-Carlo. Alas, I don’t know the location of the former family estate. What a shame. On the other hand, maybe it’s for the best. What if I lost it gambling?

My mother was a very beautiful, sweet and kind woman. She set the tone in the house. My dad adored her, listened to her and gave her his whole professor's salary.

I also had a brother by the name of Nikita. I remember how I was nine years old, and I was sent to a young pioneer summer camp. For a whole month. I remember always going hungry. Probably I was just growing. Two weeks later my dad came to visit me on his Pobeda. He brought me some food. He felt sorry for me and drove me back home in his car. I came home and found I had a brother. Nikita.

I still have a brother. But it is as if I don't have him. Things like that happen sometimes. Let God keep him in good health.

My father and mother are long gone. But I have a wife, Larissa, a trusted and devoted friend, a beautiful, intelligent woman, and a very good mother. It's important because we have a daughter, Anya, Anyuta. I sometimes call her a Piggy or Bunny Rabbit, depending on the circumstances.

She insists that she is a Hedgehog. She is almost five years old.

It takes a long time to write a book. In the meantime, we had another daughter, Nastya.



...That day my mom sent me to buy milk.

I placed the milk container in a black plastic bag, closed the zipper and crossed the Liteiny Avenue. Then I descended three dilapidated stairs on my way to the milk store.

While I was waiting in line, a stray cat joined me. It approached me trustingly as if I were an old friend, rubbed against my ankle covered with course brown cotton stockings, and began to wait patiently for the saleswoman to pour the milk into the container.

I paid for the milk and placed the container in the bag. The cat jumped into the bag after it, and I closed the zipper and walked out onto the Liteiny.

...A tram was slowly moving away from the corner of Tchaikovsky Street...

Several minutes later the loud voice of Marusya the yard-keeper would resonate in the morning stillness of the enclosed yard:

"The boy from apartment ten was run over by a tram!"



Few people remember these trams without automatic doors, but with long copper handrails. One could grab hold of them as one jumped onto the footboard, without waiting for the tram to stop...

I decided to take a ride to my favorite fisherman's store located on Liteiny, not far from the Nevsky Avenue. I could spend hours standing there, examining the hooks, spoon-baits and spinning tackle.

Grabbing the bag with the affectionate cat and the milk container in my right arm, I rushed across the street after the tram, which was gaining speed, and jumped up on the front platform of the second car...

"The boy from apartment ten was run over by a tram!"

My dad was getting ready to leave for work. My mother was in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

I jumped, even though the tram was already moving at a high speed, and it was dangerous to jump. I jumped anyway. My left leg in its course cotton stocking slipped from the platform. My left hand slowly slid down the copper handrail...

God saved me this time, too.

I remember lying in a pool of blood and milk, and for some reason not feeling any pain. Mother, who ran over along with dad as soon as she heard the yard-keeper shouting, was trying to place a blanket under my body.

I lay there thinking that now, after I had totally ripped my hateful short bridges, which reached below my knees, mother was sure to throw them away. This meant that I would wear full-length slacks to school, like an adult, and all the boys would show the greatest respect for me. I also wondered what I looked like lying there, since there were many girls and young women in the crowd, which had gathered near the tram...

It was a chilly November day, and I was eleven years old.

Somebody finally pulled me from under the tram. They untangled my leg in the torn course stocking, which had wrapped itself onto the wheel axis all the way to my knee. Then they freed my leg, squeezed by the brake shoe. I was placed on stretchers and carried to a waiting car.

The crowd parted, and I could see the tram, the rails covered with milk, the bag and the container lying next to them.

Then I noticed the cat.

Its black fur stood on end. Curving its back as a sign of bliss, it was greedily lapping up the milk from the rails. Scarlet trickles of blood were spreading along the rails in fascinating patterns.

The crowd was dispersing.

*Flight St. Petersburg – Paris, 1993*

## **CROOKS** (Episode I)

It happened in the nineteen fifties...

During those years children's bicycles, actually bicycles for adults as well, were considered a great luxury. The more fortunate ones of us had two-wheel scooters, which, if you ran fast enough, you could then ride on for quite a long time, occasionally pushing one leg against the ground. Once you accelerated, you could place both feet on the scooter and maneuver it, looking disdainfully at the girls as they scattered in every direction.

We had been to see a family of relatives. And my cousin Volodya unexpectedly presented me with a scooter. Volodya was about five years my senior, and he had "grown out of it".

When many years later I purchased my first Moskvitch, even then I didn't feel the same exhilaration I experienced when I got this used scooter. I drove it solemnly, clutching its wheel, all the way across our Dzerzhinsky District, to our house on Liteiny Avenue.

When we got home, dad and I wiped it clean, and dad polished the wheels.

I lay awake all night, waiting impatiently for morning to come, when I could at last go to the Tavrichesky Garden accompanied by Faina, our housekeeper.

Not far from the garden entrance, there was a wonderful rather flat hill with a round ice-cream pavilion on its top. Fortunate scooter owners used to drive down this very hillside – down a long alley, which went around a pond – until they disappeared from view behind a turn, hidden by abundant bushes with little white flowers.

So here I was, standing on the top of the hill with my scooter. Probably I hesitated to go down the very first time, which is why I paused. The housekeeper went someplace for a short while. I think she had a soldier friend at the time, as any decent housekeeper did during those years.

“Hey, boy, let me have a ride, I’ll give you my toy car for it.”

In front of me stood a boy my age wearing a London-style cap, which is what we called them then, with its peak turned backwards, and brown boots with black laces.

I took the toy car from his hand in silence, while the boy placed his left leg on the scooter, pushed with his foot in the brown black-laced boot and rode downhill boisterously, until he completely vanished from sight at the end of the alley, which surrounded the pond with its wild bushes.

I stood there, waiting...

Finally Fanya appeared with a look of utter satisfaction on her face.

“Where’s the scooter?” she pounced on me.

“I gave it to a boy for a ride.”

“What? He’ll never give it back.”

“Oh, he will. He gave me his toy car.”

Faina grabbed the rusty, useless toy from my hand and threw it into the bushes in consternation.

The boy was probably far away by now. He accelerated, placed both feet on the scooter and looked disdainfully at the girls as they scattered in every direction...

This was my first encounter with a crook. And I turned out to be a sucker.

What can I say? I deserved it.

But no matter what, we should trust people. Even if it is naïve. No matter what...



On the way to the airport, we were shot at.

It appears that if one is sitting in a car, shots can barely be heard – the sound drowns in the noise from the wheels and the engine. When a bullet goes through the body of a car, it sounds as if somebody is drilling a hole in a can with a nail.

In short, we received three bullet holes in the left back fender of our car. After shooting at us, the bastards overtook us and drove away. Whether they were trying to intimidate my partners from Siberia or confused us with somebody else, I never found out.

I brought my collection of jewelry to Siberia in the hopes of opening a large local market here, bigger than the entire European market, but my Siberian partners must have slipped up. I spent two days in the unheated hotel, in the local “luxury” suite. I can assure you it wasn’t anything like the Hôtel de Paris, where I was given a robe and a pair of slippers. In this place they had never heard about room service, and when you turned the hot water faucet the water was cold. On the third day I decided that I was sick of Siberian millions, so I pulled my suitcase with the precious jewelry collection from under my bed and asked to be taken to the airport.

But there turned out to be more than just that one unpleasantness with the bullets shot at us on the highway. To make things worse, I found out that nobody thought to reserve tickets for me for the trip home, and there were no direct flights that day to St. Petersburg. I had to fly through Moscow, with a stopover in Domodedovo, and then make a long trip to Sheremetyevo airport for the final leg of my journey.

The last time I made the trip between these two Moscow airports was some thirty years ago, when, as a young actor, I was flying to Leninabad, to perform at the local drama theater.

As always, the passengers who landed in Domodedovo were accosted by a gang of pushy drivers, who offered the services of their cab in ingratiating voices.

“Sir, may I give you a lift?”

I saw in front of me a smiling young man, modestly dressed and inspiring the utmost confidence. So I made my first mistake that day. Actually, it didn’t happen all at once. I started by shaking my head in a gesture of denial, making it clear that I was doing just fine. He was supposed to understand from the way I looked that I was in no need of his services, since my own driver was already standing next to my office car, holding his cap in his hand, prepared to relieve me of my suitcases any minute and fling open the car doors before me obligingly.

I knew that if I couldn’t do without it and needed a cab, it was I who should hire it and not the other way round.

But the young man was very polite and clearly upset. “Ah, I was hoping to be able to buy my wife a present,” he said in a sinking voice.

And I was moved. I even thought: I’ll pay the guy and also give him my small Easter egg covered with transparent enamel, light as a breeze – he could never find a better gift for his wife.

“What kind of a car do you have?”

“A new Volga.”

“Well then... OK, let’s go. How much will you charge me to get to Sheremetyevo?”

“Fifty thousand.”

To tell you the truth, I was losing track of Russian prices. In Paris, for instance, I knew for sure that the trip from Charles De Gaulle Airport to the city center cost two hundred fifty francs.

I agreed and immediately made my second mistake by failing to ask how many passengers would share the cab with me. I must have gotten used to the fact that in France these things didn’t happen.

A faceless individual in a trench coat was stomping his feet impatiently near the six-cylinder Volga. He was holding a suitcase, from which he extracted a homemade sandwich with sprats and hard-boiled eggs, and started snacking without further ado. I guessed that this was another passenger, but his homemade sandwich, his trench coat, so typical for an employee going on a business trip, and his well-worn suitcase inspired complete confidence.

The guy turned out to be very sociable and wheedled his way into my private life. He told me that he was from Sochi and asked whether I had ever been there.

Had I ever been to Sochi? You must be kidding. I spent the best years of my life there, first in the Zhemchuzhina Hotel and then in the Dagomys. Oh, when we were still young...

I supported the conversation. That is why, when another passenger appeared on the horizon – in all honesty, he also seemed to be a decent guy, here on a visit from Siberia – it would have been quite inappropriate to refuse to go and start looking for another ride.

There is a reason for the popular Russian saying: The only inappropriate thing is to sleep on the ceiling, because the blanket doesn’t stay where it belongs.

It was because of this perception of what is inappropriate and what isn’t, so typical of the intelligentsia that I found myself in a fix.

We started getting into the car. The new passenger sat in front, and I wanted to take the back seat as usual, but decided to offer the man with the sandwich, who was here on a business trip, to get in first. He refused, saying that he was only going as far as the metro station, so I got in before him.

To the left of me was a door with a broken handle, to the right was my traveling companion. There was no way I could retreat.

We were just about to start, when a shady character came running up to our charming driver:

“Seryoga, take one guy here to the metro station for twenty bucks!”

It seemed odd. Hadn’t the driver told me that he was in Domodedovo by pure chance?

A huge hunk of a man with a smile befitting a professional executioner came up to the car.

For some reason it didn’t occur to me at the time that there wasn’t a single metro station between Domodedovo and Sheremetyevo, and couldn’t be any. Nevertheless, I said sternly:

“Forget it! You can’t earn all the money in the world. Either you get going or I’m getting out. There’s not enough room here even for two.”

“But it’s an extra twenty bucks, guys,” the driver wined. “Couldn’t you move over a bit?...”

“Either you get going or I’m getting out,” I repeated.

So we drove off.

I sat in the back, holding my kid leather Parisian attaché-case filled with jewelry on my lap. As always, I was wearing my grandfather’s ring with the large sparkling diamond on my left hand finger. The family legend said that this ring once saved my grandfather from complete bankruptcy at the casino in Monte-Carlo. For promotional purposes, I sometimes also wore a diamond watch by the Ananov Company on the same hand, which was visible from under the cuff.

The two men who were here on official business, one from Sochi and the other, as we later found out, from Chelyabinsk, were engaged in a lively conversation.

I didn’t know exactly why, but for some reason I was somewhat anxious deep at heart. It was dark and muddy all around us, and we were driving along a dark, muddy road.

Suddenly, I overheard gambling mentioned in the conversation. The guy from Sochi was praising the casino, which had been recently opened on a boat moored across the way from the Zhemchuzhina Hotel.

What games do they play there? It couldn’t be the roulette, since the boat is rocking, I thought to myself. I thought that and said aloud:

“No, it must be cards.”

“Black Jack?”

“No, it’s a simple game, with just two cards. And you can have up to seventeen people playing.”

The guy in the front seat appeared to be interested in the game requiring just two cards:

“Teach me how to play it! My family and I often play cards at our summer house, and there’s a bunch of us...”

“How can you teach it without cards, it’s impossible,” the guy from Sochi rejected the idea.

As soon as they started talking about card games I was on the alert. But I didn’t show it. The thing is that I knew since I was a teenager how infamously these card games in trains or on cruise ships, in parks or at the beach near the Petropavlovka usually ended. They started with “dice for a ruble”, then they substituted the pack of cards without anyone noticing, which was known as “the change”, and in one fell swoop the sucker, who was “fortunate enough” to get the best card, was swindled of all his cash and of other valuables as well. But this was a long time ago, when we were young... It was difficult to imagine that the same primitive scenario could be replayed now, at the end of the twentieth century, and that I, a jeweler whose name was known across the world, was to take part in these events.

“I won’t teach you anything without cards,” the guy from Sochi sounded almost hurt by the idea.

“But I have a pack of cards, I do! I never go on a business trip without them. Cards and checkers...”

You’d better pay more attention to your job, I thought to myself.

The passenger in the front seat pulled out the pack. My neighbor started counting the cards, taking the aces out of the pack.

“Two aces are missing here!” he said in a strangely indignant tone of voice.

“That can’t be... Oops, shoot, you’re right.” And the guy in the front seat produced two aces from his other pocket.

There was an aching pain in my heart, and I recalled my youth once again. That time I gambled away my first pair of watches, an anodized Pobeda, which I had purchased with the money I earned working on a collective farm in the summer.

I started to listen more attentively to the explanations of the guy from Sochi.

“Each player gets two cards. An ace is worth eleven points, a ten is worth ten, a queen is worth three and all the other cards are worth their actual value. Two cards are placed in the bank. If you want to have them, you must double the bank, but then a point is added to whatever the cards taken from the bank are worth ...”

The Sochi guy started dealing the cards to show us the game in real, placing the cards on top of my attaché-case. Once he had given them out, he showed us how to bargain and how to take cards from the bank, getting rid of the old cards.

“Well guys... I’ll now deal in earnest, like they do it at the casino,” he announced solemnly.

He indeed gave out the cards, having shuffled only the bottom of the pack and not letting one of us cut the pack.

“There’s ten thousand in the bank, for starters.” And he put the bill on top of my attach-case.

I had a multitude of different experiences during my long life. I also learned many things. In my student years I took part in car races and became fabulously good at billiards. During lectures in higher math, which were delivered by Professor Shirkhov, a prominent scientist, I zealously played pool at the very top row of the huge auditorium, the lecture hall of the history department of the Leningrad University. Please forgive me, dear professor.

I once came across a couple of swindlers. My playing technique was very high but still there was nothing I could do with them – each time the cards were given out they ended up winning nine tricks or winning none, depending on what they declared. As they say, the intellect is powerless against pure luck.

The two friends were kind enough to “treat” me with money I had lost to them. I got to know them better. Later, one of them, Yura Rozhkovsky, quite a decent guy, revealed to me some of the basic schemes of his masterful cheating. I appeared to be a capable student. I wanted to become a great swindler. I did not become a great one, but was definitely quite remarkable. I always played honestly with honest partners, but experienced great joy when I “conned” beginning crooks, who played “in pairs”.

I acquired such skill that when I was paying with crooks I handed out good cards to them, not to myself, but in bad sets. A declared bid of nine with the absence of the right hand or else a bid of zero with an “eight”, which was the only card of that hand. In nine seconds, without looking into my cards and talking with the “client” nonchalantly, I dealt twenty-two cards out of thirty six in “a fixed” order, offered the “client” to cut the pack and then gave out the cards with one hand, placing them in “a suitable” order....



(I suggest that those who do not understand some of the jargon, should go to Domodedovo for an explanation.)

“There’s ten thousand in the bank, for starters.”

There was no way I could get out of the car. I had two “traveling companions” and they were undoubtedly professionals. There was also the driver. I was feverishly trying to think of a way to escape, without losing my head and the kid leather attaché-case. The guy from Sochi pushed it a couple of times already, sort of by accident. He seemed to be trying to figure out what was inside.

I could not refuse to play. I knew that in such cases one of the “partners” would start complaining about my lack of respect, provoking a quarrel, which would end with a fight and with “confiscation” of cash by force.

I decided that the only solution was to outwit these professionals. And then to escape. At the same time I still had a tiny hope that this whole suggestion to play cards was a real thing, without any scam, and that I was not “a client” at all, but just a traveling companion.

The maximum number of points with two cards is twenty-two, two aces each worth eleven points. If, however, the other two aces are in the bank, they are worth one extra point, and this has to be the strongest combination in this simple game.

Thus, I figured out quickly, if I am simply a traveling companion and the game is a real one, I will get two ordinary cards from the pack. However, if I am “a client” I should be given two aces, while the other two aces will be placed in the bank. As a regular sucker I would decide not to take anything out of the bank, since I had such wonderful cards anyway. One of my “traveling companions” would then take the cards from the bank – and he would have the winning combination in his hands. Meanwhile “the client” with his two aces, thinking that he was extremely lucky, would gamble away everything he had, because he was so confident of victory. In the end, he would have nothing on but a pair of socks and wouldn’t have enough cash to continue the game, or else his “partner” would take the cards from the bank with a show of ecstatic joy, present the aces – and bingo – the train would roll on.

As the best scenario, this sucker would simply be thrown out of the car onto the muddy Okruzhnaya highway and given a little cash so that he could eventually get to the metro station, but not too fast. In the worst scenario, he would be hit on the head with something heavy. These were my options.

It was a sure thing. It was practically impossible to prove that this was dishonest, and nobody was forcing the sucker to play.

I looked at my cards. Two aces.

Clearly I was “a client”.

What can I say, my friends, so you are here on a business trip, fine. You cheated a professional, but this is not the end yet.

I counted in my mind how much cash I had on me. I had about eight million rubles in my wallet plus some foreign currency.

I placed ten thousand rubles on the table. The game began.

The player in the front seat bid a hundred. The Sochi guy added half a million. I bit six hundred and added more.

When it was my turn two rounds later, there were eight million rubles in the bank. Now, in order to take the cards from the bank and open my cards I had to double the amount in the bank. But they could refuse to give me the cards from the bank anyway.

My neighbor acted in the best traditions of the Stanislavsky school of acting. But the guy in the front seat lost his calm:

“If I am out of cash, can I wager my gold chain? It weighs about three and a half ounces.”

You, stupid! How in the world would you have a three and a half ounce gold chain if you were a simple employee on a business trip from Izhevsk? And to whom are you planning to wager it anyway? To this forester guy?

“Folks, do you accept foreign currency?”

“Sure we do,” the folks nodded gleefully.

“How do you convert it? According to the Central Bank rate?”

“Sure, according to the Central Bank.”

I counted out a double amount while they weren’t looking, placed it on “the table” and grabbed the cards from the bank. It was all so unexpected that the guys started yelling:

“”What are you doing?”

“I placed a double in the bank,” I said calmly. “Though it was probably stupid of me... I had fine cards anyway...” I pretended to be an utter simpleton.

So, I outwitted them. I now had the winning set in my hands. Two aces from the bank.

My “partners” threw down their cards in anger, while I grabbed the money and, without counting, shoved it into my pockets.

All I had to do now was to escape alive.

“All right...” the guy in the front drawled, unable to believe that “the sucker” had beaten them. “OK, let’s give it another try. You deal another time, give us a chance to win some of it back. Deal...” he was hurrying his partner.

“Hold your horses, guys. We won’t deal just now. To begin with, we will analyze your errors.”

“What kind of errors?” the guy in front couldn’t understand what I meant.

The driver was turning the wheel in silence.

“Your first error, my men, is that you took me for ‘a sucker’ from Siberia because my flight was from Omsk. But I don’t live in Omsk, I live in Petersburg, our northern capital, so to say. In St. Petersburg. And the things people in Omsk haven’t even started learning, we, here in St. Petersburg, are already beginning to forget. Now your second error...” I interrupted my companions who were indignantly trying to say something. “You made your second error when you gave away that you had a three and a half ounce gold chain. “Think you, man! Where would a guy like you, on a business trip from Izhevsk or from Chelyabinsk, I already forgot, get a chain like this?” Embarrassed, the guy didn’t say anything. “On the other hand, you are an artist,” I said approvingly to the man next to me. “Your sandwich with sprats is a great find. Where did you learn that?”

“There are such places,” he said evasively. In general, he was silent most of the time. He must have been pondering whether he should “do me in” now or a bit later...

“And now, my friends, let’s get to main point. Your ‘work’ with the cards is abominable. Cutting off your arms wouldn’t be punishment enough!”

“Why?”

“Here’s why. You, for instance. You take the aces out of the pack right in front of the client. And then, after you deal, he finds them in his own hands. You don’t offer him to cut the pack. How can you be so careless? If you need the aces, play a game just for fun, not for money, pick them up when he is not looking, shuffle the cards properly so that the client isn’t surprised, with the jackets facing upwards, not the way you do it, when you shuffle the five bottom cards without touching those on top. And you should give the pack to the client, not to your partner, so he cuts it. Then he will never figure out what happened. Did you get it? Now cut the pack.”

My neighbor cut the pack mechanically.

“Well... Now what?”

“Now, I’ll deal.”

I gave out the cards

The guys looked at them as if they had never seen them before. Probably I reprimanded them very sternly and hurt their professional dignity, so to say.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Take your cards.”

They picked them up and started staring at them in disbelief.

“Well, what now? What are you staring at? Haven’t you ever seen an ace in your life? There are two more in the bank, see for yourself.”

My neighbor looked at the cards in the bank. He found two aces there.

“Shoot, he also did it with his other hand...” he said to his partner in a hushed voice. “Teach us how you do it!”

“Teaching costs money.”

“How much?”

“Let me think,” I said thoughtfully. “And how much does it actually cost to get to Sheremetyevo?”

“A hundred fifty bucks.”

“All right. You convinced me. Take me to Sheremetyevo, and I’ll teach you along the way. By the way, where are we?”

“On the Okruzhnaya Highway, boss,” the driver responded.

“Will you make it in an hour?”

“I’ll do my best.”

The driver turned the wheel to the accompaniment of my “traveler’s tales”. Before long I began to recognize familiar places, and we were soon on the Leningradsky Avenue. I felt somewhat relieved.

I showed my new “friends” several simple tricks. They watched me, holding their breath. Finally, I saw the airport in the distance.

“Drop me off at the VIP entrance,” I said curtly.

The “visitors here on business” smiled crookedly.

“Wow, such are our VIPs. That’s why our lives are so miserable...”

I gave the driver a banknote from the cash I had just won.

“You’ll now have happier lives,” I said and got out of the car.

“Couldn’t you leave us some money for beer, if nothing else,” the guy who sat next to me said into the open window, smiling submissively.

“You shouldn’t be drinking. You have homework to do.”

Trying not to hurry but also not to be too slow, I sauntered towards the safety of the airport hall. I escaped, without losing my head or the attaché-case. Maybe I even saved my life.

A week later I was on a flight to Moscow. As I sat in my seat, I opened the latest issue of the Smena Newspaper, which the stewardess offered to me courteously, and I noticed a small article under the headline “Events”:

“Businessman X lost 130 million in cards to his chance traveling companions, and when he attempted to recover the lost money, he received a blow on the head with a revolver and was thrown out of the car on the highway.”

Probably this was the work of my “acquaintances”. So they had finally managed to earn some money for beer.

## **JOURNEY TO THE HOLIDAY**

I was born the first time on August 8, 1945 in Leningrad. I was baptized at the Spaso-Preobrazhensky Cathedral and our housekeeper, Faina Vasiliyevna, was my godmother.

I was “born” the second time on November 6, 1991 at the Ritz Hotel in Paris. Ludmila Borisovna Narusova-Sobchak was my “godmother” and Mr. Patrick Shoal, President of

the Paris firm Elida-Gibbs Faberge and Jean-Michelle Baille, Minister of Tourism, France, were my “godfathers”.

November 6 was the day of the Grand Presentation of the Ananov Company held at the Ritz Hotel.

Prior to that, in the spring of 1991, at a reception held by the Russian Embassy in Paris, Patrick Shoal had a conversation with Anatoly Sobchak, then Mayor of St. Petersburg, in the course of which Mr. Shoal inquired about the fate of the house of Faberge on Bolshaya Morskaya Street in Petersburg. He mentioned that he would have liked to take part in the revival of this magnificent jewelry firm that knew such glory. But, he commented sadly, Russia does not have masters of such caliber, and the secrets of Karl Faberge have been lost forever, so there is nobody who could produce the marvelous, subtle and intricate gems, which gave the firm its glory.

Ludmila Borisovna, the Mayor’s wife, interrupted the conversation – this criticism of her motherland rubbed her the wrong way.

“I know one such master,” she said modestly. And she showed him a small medallion, an Easter egg covered with transparent enamel, light as a breeze, which she was wearing around her neck. A guilloche design, just like the one on the old works by Faberge, was sparkling and shimmering under the enamel.

The lean, sophisticated Mr. Shoal, smart looking in a typically French manner, was a true expert in French perfume and the souls of French women. It wasn’t without a reason that he was the President of Faberge Fragrances. But, alas, he didn’t know anything about jewelry art.

The small egg made by Andrei Ananov, an unknown craftsman who had just recently organized the first post-Soviet private jewelry workshop in Petersburg, found itself in the hands of appraisers at Cartier, the world’s greatest jewelry design house.

Its experts turned the Easter egg every which way and examined it from this side and that. Then they breathed a sigh and said: this is a good egg, we used to make ones like it about a hundred years or so.

Some three weeks later the lean, sophisticated Patrick Shoal, smart looking in a typically French manner, appeared on the banks of the Neva River, complete with an entourage and the Easter egg. In his briefcase there lay a newly executed contract, which smelled of gold and paint from the printing house. The contract stipulated that the firm Elida-Gibbs Faberge, the world owner of the “Faberge” trademark, grants the rights to stamp the items produced at Andrei Ananov’s workshop in Petersburg with the name of the great master.

This was an astounding offer. It was both tempting and honorable. It smelled of fresh paint from the printing house and lots of cash. It lay in a fancy red binder with a stamped emblem of the Russian Empire and the “Faberge” signature.

Peter and Paul Cathedral glimpsed through the large windows of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs office, where the meeting was taking place.

A lean, smart-looking forty six year old man rose from his seat. Speaking in what he thought was perfect English, he thanked everyone for the great honor. He presented the visitors with a picture depicting Karl Faberge's country villa, surrounded with an uncultivated park in the suburbs of St. Petersburg. He told them something about his forefathers, of which the guests clearly made out only the word "aristocrats". He explained to them something about the origins of his name, spoke about his students and his children, and said that he had the greatest respect for Faberge, but he would like to see his own name on his jewelry. In other words, he refused to accept the red binder, which smelled of fresh paint from the printing house and lots of cash.

But the charismatic, courteous and elegant Mr. Shoal proved himself to be not only and a true expert in French perfumes, but also a very intelligent man. He saw right through the conceited and ambitious but also gifted and tenacious forty six year old twit. So early in November, the contract-signing ceremony was held in Paris, and the contract smelled of gold and fresh paint from the printing house. Two names were engraved on the fancy scarlet binder, alongside the two-headed eagle – the symbol of the Russian Empire – "Faberge from Ananov", "Faberge par Ananov", Paris-St. Petersburg.

In November 1991 the Ritz Hotel was celebrating the birth of a new name on the Paris jewelry horizon. A unique jewelry collection was being exhibited under two names – Faberge par Ananov. For this one evening a transparent ceiling was placed over the hotel's winter garden. The guests ate back caviar with large tablespoons. Andrei Ananov gave interviews for French TV channels in what he thought was perfect English. Most of the ladies were wearing diamonds. The jeweler's wife looked stunning.

Jean-Michelle Baille, Minister of Tourism, and the recorded voice of Mayor Sobchak opened the evening event. Fate slightly opened before Ananov the door to the dazzling city of Paris, and he instantly pushed his finger through narrow opening.

Several years passed since that day. The narrow opening in the magical door, which leads to the magnificent city of Paris, has widened.



The energy of creativity cannot be reproduced or destroyed. It passes from one form into another, from one state to another.

Hurrah to the law of transformation of quantity into quality! I have lived the greater part of my life, and, believe me, I lived honestly. I worked hard. I was ambitious and stubborn. I didn't do people any harm. I tried to do good. I love beauty. I love my work. I love Paris.

I am proud of Nikolai Alexandrovich Romanov, Nicholas II, the great Russian tsar who gave Paris a bridge as a gift – the bridge of Alexander de Trua. A bridge named after his father. The great grandchildren of the tsar's Russian contemporaries walk along this bridge. French people too walk along this bridge. The imprint of Russian generosity, of Russian open-mindedness and of the Russian soul lies on this great gift. It joins the two banks of the River Seine forever, just as history at some point joined together Russia and France, and, with God's help, also forever.

“Elida-Gibbs Faberge” shaped my path to the city of Paris.

Patrick Shoal stood on the threshold. Charming and talented Nancy Bianki helped me a great deal at the beginning. Writer Maurice Druon, a classic of contemporary French literature, commended me on my literary début. “...If everything else is written in the same spirit, just as energetically, vividly and with the same psychological truthfulness, then, I think, we will have a good piece of writing, which will portray the everyday life and the atmosphere of the era.” This is an excerpt from his review of my future book.

Count Lev Alexeyevich Bobrinsky and Countess Masha Magaloff, Great Prince Vladimir Kirillovich Romanov, Great Princess Leonida Georgiyevna Romanova, Serge de Paulen and many other people, both famous and unknown, but all of them noble and beautiful individuals, have helped and supported me along my way in the gorgeous and complex city of Paris.

But one of these people stands apart from the rest. He is intelligent, sweet, kind and a little sad. He is energetic, happy and miserable; he is a businessman and an artist. He is a Frenchman with a small portion of Russian blood and a big Russian heart.

Mon pere me disait... My father told me... He alone knows what exactly he meant by this phrase. His name is Vladimir Rouen.

In another hour our plane will land in Paris, at the Charles de Gaulle Airport. Paris is a beautiful city. Very much like St. Petersburg, only much better taken care of. And it doesn't smell of rotten capitalism anywhere there. And nobody pees in the elevators.

I am flying to Paris on business. In seven years I am going to get a Grand-prix here and the Order of the Legion d'Honneur. Just like Karl Faberge. In truth, no one but I knows about it yet. My father told me: “If you want to achieve something look for ways to do it and not reasons for doubt.” So I am looking. One of my “ways” is my showcase in Versailles, at the Grand Palais Hotel. The second one is my September exhibition at the Grand Palle Hotel on the Champs Elysees.

“In twenty minutes our plane will land at the Charles de Gaulle Airport in the city of Paris. The temperature is plus sixteen degrees Celsius. Please refrain from smoking and fasten your belts.”



It is now one o'clock in St. Petersburg, and in Paris it is eleven. I have just added two hours to my life. Life is beautiful. I love you all, my dear Frenchmen. And French women too.

Bonjour.

*Flight St. Petersburg - Paris*

## **CROOKS** (Episode II)

It happened in the summer, at the very height of the season, when the Europa Hotel, where our jewelry salon is located on the ground floor, is packed full of visitors.

A young man in his thirties entered the store. His looks attracted attention. He was tastefully and meticulously dressed. The details of his outfit – the tie he was wearing, the buckle on his belt, his socks and cigarette lighter all attested to the well being of their owner and his high social standing. His conduct in the salon, where he was surrounded by delicate and unique objects made of gold, enamel and precious stones, was polite and slightly self-conscious. In other words, in this respect he was no different from most of our clients who for the first time find themselves in the sumptuous interior of the gallery.

The salon's most beautiful saleswomen demonstrated to him the best service that can be found in Europe. Charismatic and modest Elena and tactful, sex-appealing Tanya organized a comprehensive tour of the salon, treated the visitor to a cup of good coffee and gave him an ashtray and the entire gamut of their feminine charm, remaining however within bounds of the salon's strict rules of conduct. They clearly sensed a customer rolling in money.

Their intuition proved right. After walking around the store and listening attentively to their lecture on the art of Faberge and Ananov's great accomplishments, the young man asked them if the salon carried any items with five-karat diamonds. His accent gave away the fact that he was what the Russians call "an individual of Caucasian ethnicity", which meant that he came from one of the republics in the Caucasian Mountains. He never specified exactly what he was looking for: a ring, a jewelry box or a pin. He just asked for "an item".

Somewhat taken aback, the young women hurried to call the boss. True enough, customers of such caliber are usually taken care of by the head manager or the gallery owner himself. To make a long story short, fifteen minutes later I was entering the salon.



Dealing with diamonds, particularly in so far as pricing, sales, getting an order and designing a sketch are concerned, requires special skills and knowledge from a manager.

One needs more than to be able to characterize a stone – its weight and color. One has to be psychologically astute, know life, have a good imagination and be cautious. First of all one has to make sure that the customer is indeed trustworthy and has the necessary funds. One should be able to casually find out why and for whom the customer is purchasing the diamond. Is he buying it for himself or as a gift? Is he a third party or the future owner? How much does he himself know about diamonds? What would he like to have and what can he actually afford? In the end, no matter what type of stone or item the customer would like to acquire, he should leave the gallery with the purchase or order that the manager would like him to make.

Let us say a customer only wants to see an oval-shaped contemporary-cut stone. In response to this request, he should immediately be given a colorful expose about the old methods of refining diamonds, when they were cut in order to be iridescent in the flickering light of the candles. This has to be followed by a mysterious, romantic or bloody legend that is attached like a cortege to every large old diamond. The customer should then be told about the special charm of slightly asymmetrical facets, which were cut by the master jeweler's hand. The artist's soul brought to life this formerly dead crystal, and the tips of his slender sensitive fingers were able to convey the warmth of his love for his beautiful creations.

And if the stone is imperfect, which is usually the case, the customer will hear an even more colorful tirade about the inclusions in the diamond, which convey the information that the Creator concealed behind the lattice constant, much like a floppy disc placed in a computer drive. And if "the blemish" in your stone is located right above the frame and is well visible with the naked eye, the customer should be told that this brings luck in unrequited love and predicts an event, which, sooner or later, will change its owner's life for the better. It is, so to say, a sign from above, which at some point will be explained and will bring him unexpected good fortune.

This is an opportune moment to say something about the tragic destiny of the royal jeweler at the court of Queen Victoria, who once received a request from Her Majesty to cut a huge diamond, weighing more than a hundred eighty karats. He was supposed to cut it in three parts and make three oval diamonds for the Princess' wedding ceremony. You should stress that the poor old soul, who realized what a crime he was asked to commit, spent an entire years measuring the facets of the sintering line – the only line along which a diamond crystal can be cut. He wept with grief because he knew that cutting such a large, amazingly beautiful and pure stone was a sin before the Creator. However, he was running out of time.

Unable to back out of the Queen's orders, the old man finally glued the diamond to a special frame, fastened it down with a clever gripping device, set an iron wedge to it, crossed himself but ... was unable to strike it with a hammer. It was as if someone was

firmly holding his hand. Again and again he came up to his workbench, but he did not dare to accomplish his mission.

It was getting dark. The moon was shedding its light through the small window of his workshop. The quivering, unsteady light of the candle was reflected in the facets of the large stone. The old jeweler crossed himself for the last time and walked up to the workbench, his legs buckling under him. He lifted the hammer and lowered it forcefully, inserting the wedge into the diamond's brilliant body. Sparks flew in every direction. The hammer fell out of the old man's hand. In the morning his dead body was discovered sprawled on the floor of his tiny workshop. He died of a heart attack. Next to his body lay three identical parts of the cut diamond.



Stories such as these have a much more powerful effect on customers than any vigorous praising of the stone, or any arguments testifying to the lower price of an old diamond as compared to a new one. In the end the customer will be satisfied when he leaves, taking with him a purchase he never intended to make.

If, on the other hand, you are selling a new, contemporary diamond, the situation can easily be reversed. As you hold the diamond with the tip of your fingers and revolve it slowly, so that the reflection from the ray of light passing through the crystal occasionally catches the customer's eye, you should say pensively:

“How long the Creator had to wait for the arrival of such fantastic computer technologies, which allow us to transform an imperfect natural octahedron into a piece of jewelry perfect in every parameter!”

We can pity jewelers of bygone centuries, who were forced to glue a stone over and over and over again, as they added each new facet. No matter how hard they tried, the previous facet still remained hidden under the glue, and it was virtually impossible to make all the facets the same. That is why the price of a new diamond is higher. An old stone definitely costs less than a new one, and even our second hand shops discount them by forty percent during evaluation. If, in addition, you were to mention in passing that old stones are not valued at all in the West, you can be sure that the customer will swallow it hook, line and sinker. And he will leave paying considerably more than he had originally intended.



So, as I said, fifteen minutes after that telephone call, I was already entering the store. It was probably the customer's lucky day. Just the day before a company with a long history and good reputation in the West had sent me several rings with large diamonds for sale. One of them had a beautiful blue oval stone of five karats. Its price was more or else equal to the annual turnover of the whole salon, and we were to receive a substantial commission as a percentage of the price, if we were to sell the ring. This percent was

equal to the monthly payroll of all the employees of the salon. The due date of payment was coming close, and I was not having an easy time making these regular monthly payments. In other words, I was going to the salon in the hopes of resolving all my current financial problems with this one sale. It was a very enticing prospect. But even though I was hopeful, something bothered me. My intuition was sending me barely noticeable, vague and weak signals of distress. However, necessity drove me forward, and I obeyed its call.



I entered the store, introduced myself and gave the customer my business card in the hopes of getting his in response. But he did not give me one. This was strange. Customers of such caliber usually own attractive business cards kept in specially designed small silver boxes with gold framing, or else adorned with a holographic trade emblem. Instead of a business card the customer gave me only his name, one typical for “an individual of Caucasian ethnicity”, let us say Givi.

I did not immediately start demonstrating our diamonds to the customer. Instead, I first invited him to join me at the bar. We sat at the table and I offered him a drink, which he refused, accepting only a cup of coffee. I too had some coffee. We started a conversation.

I was not in a hurry to ask the customer about his wishes and intentions, or about his life, place of residence and occupation. Instead, I told him about myself, smiling and sometimes pausing to give him an opportunity to respond to the associations, which I awakened in him.

I must admit that the information he shared with me was very scarce. Still, I managed to find out that Givi is a collector and, among other things, he collects rare diamonds. And that a five-karat diamond is missing in his collection.

The situation was gradually becoming clearer to me. Particularly after Givi said that he intended to pay cash for the purchase, moreover in dollars. And even though our salon engages in foreign currency transactions officially, and it would be totally within the law for us to be paid in dollars, particularly since these events took place at a time when dollar bank accounts were permitted, I was alerted by the customer’s intended plan of payment.

Respectable customers all over the world use credit cards or checks, when they make purchases. In special cases involving large amounts, they transfer the money directly from their bank accounts. On the other hand, things could be quite transparent. The dough was clearly from the black market, and Givi was in no hurry to put this money in the bank.

Quite possibly, he needed the expensive stone not for his so-called collection, but for contraband. However, this was none of my business.

It was my business to make sure that there was no cheating involved, no sleight of hand, no hocus-pocus or even open theft, and that I was not accepting bad dollars. I had to protect my interests, but at the same time I couldn't insult the customer with my suspicions. So I continued my innocent and casual small talk.

It was obvious that the deal could not take place right away. The customer had no briefcase or bag with him, and he came without a bodyguard, whereas the amount he intended to pay could not very well be hidden in his pocket. Consequently, at least one more meeting was forthcoming, which we arranged in the course of our conversation. One last thing remained – I had to show him the ring, so that he could make a decision and bring over the money on the following day. We rose from the table and walked into the salon.



The staff had been instructed in advance. The salon doors were temporarily locked; our security guard was on the alert and was watching the customer's every move. We walked into the back room, pulled up two armchairs and sat down. One of my staff opened the safe and handed me the ring.

Givi took a magnifying glass and began to examine the diamond. It became immediately clear to me that he was not a professional, and he did not even try to conceal that fact. He liked the appearance of the stone and said that he was going to bring his jeweler along with him, who would evaluate the quality of the diamond. After that he would make his final decision. We scheduled our next meeting and he left. I sent our security guard to check on the car Givi was driving, but he reported that the customer had left the hotel on foot.

When I walked into the hotel on the following day, Givi and his jeweler, who had a slightly less obvious face of "an individual of Caucasian ethnicity", were already waiting for me at the bar near the salon entrance.

I had my reasons for scheduling the meeting during lunch break. The store doors were closed for one hour once again, and the hotel security was warned about the likelihood of an alarm signal, which we could activate unobtrusively by pressing special distance controls. I took the customer and the jeweler to the back room, but instead of taking the ring out of the safe, I said to them:

"I am very sorry, but you should be able to understand me. I have never seen you in my life. We are talking about a very large sum of money. To avoid any mishap, we will now drive to the bank, which will take no more than a few minutes, and there, in the bank headquarters, you can examine the stone and the certificate of authenticity issued by a Swiss lab, a valid document testifying to the fact that the diamond is genuine. In the event

that you decide to purchase the ring, you will pay for it at the bank, and the money will immediately be deposited on our company's bank account."

This was actually intended as a test.

If these were real customers and not crooks, they were unlikely to refuse. However if they were crooks indeed, they would not agree to go to the bank, which would make it impossible for them to escape if they were playing some kind of game.

After talking it over, Givi and the jeweler agreed. And I began to feel more confident. Particularly since this time Givi was carrying an attractive leather Cartier attaché case, which theoretically was big enough to hold the required amount in cash.

To make it convincing I called the bank and reported:

"Too bad. The bank is closed for lunch. Unfortunately we'll have to start here," and I made a sign to my staff.

One of them brought me the ring from the safe. Givi's partner, the jeweler about whom Givi told me the day before, took a powerful magnifying glass out of his pocket, sat down closer to the light and began to study the diamond. He spent a rather long time performing the examination, and all the while I sat next to him, watching him closely. When he was finally through studying the external surface of the stone, he pulled out a small white plastic bottle with a lid, exactly like one of those bottles in which brand medications are sold, and he pored into it the liquid contents of two small bottles he also brought along with him. He then dropped the ring into the liquid and adjusted the lid tightly on the bottle.

He handed me the bottle and said:

"Let it stand in the safe for an hour or so. There are very many fingerprints on the stone and it should be cleaned to perfection."

I took the bottle. I didn't doubt for a second that the ring was there, but the question remained – what ring? Was it my original ring or one, which the jeweler cleverly replaced it with if he was indeed a crook?

I tried opening the lid. It would not open.

"Please open it," I asked.

"What for?"

"I have forgotten to write down the catalog number of the ring. I'm afraid I might forget to do it later."

The pretext was clearly farfetched but in this case, particularly in view of the amount involved, I had to ignore such minor inconsistencies.

The jeweler opened the bottle. No doubt it was my ring lying there at the bottom. The liquid smelled of ammonium chloride. What could I say, everything was correct. Ammonium chloride is really used to clean diamonds.

I closed the lid on the bottle myself. The lid made a clasp sound as it landed tightly on the top of the bottle. I put the bottle back into the safe, and all three of us walked out of the salon and made our way towards the hotel bar to pass the time while the diamond “was taking a bath”.



Once again we engaged in pleasant small talk, sipping our coffee. And once again I received no additional information about my customers' occupation, place of residence or intentions regarding the diamond. My new acquaintances only mentioned Moscow several times in the course of the conversation and said a few words regarding the fact that they had recently made a good deal of money, and were now taking time off and considering new venues for their business. They said nothing else that was worthwhile or in any way compromising.

Failing to find out anything of substance, I decided to tell Givi and his companion a few things about myself, so that they wouldn't form a wrong impression about me. I had a hidden agenda – I wanted to reveal some episodes from my life, which would make them think twice if they really intended to swindle me. So I told them what happened to me once at Domodedovo airport, when two “random passengers” who drove in a cab with me turned out to be card gamblers and crooks, and how they had tried to outsmart me and what came out of it. It seemed to me that Givi and the jeweler were somewhat impressed by my story.

We finished our coffee and returned to the salon.

The jeweler continued his examination of the stone. I was slowly getting more and more irritated by this endless scrutiny. But though I had many other things to do, I did not let my eyes off the guy and sat there, as if glued to my chair, while the jeweler examined the diamond through his magnifying glass.

Givi and the jeweler expressed their wish to repeat the cleaning procedure. And once again I placed the ring into the bottle with my own hands and locked it in the safe. And once again we whiled away the time, drinking coffee at the bar. At long last, after washing the stone and examining it for the umpteenth time, the jeweler put the ring aside, leaned his back against the chair in a gesture of exhaustion, and pronounced:

“The diamond is pure. That’s an undisputable fact. But the color... I think it’s not as blue in the evening as it had seemed this morning...”

At this point I lost it. I told him that if determining the purity of a stone required some special skills, one had to be far-sighted not to see a color that is so obviously blue. Particularly when he had an authentic document, a Swiss certificate right there, under his nose. In general, he wouldn’t have been allowed such manipulations in any large jewelry firm in the world: he would have merely been shown the item and given the price. I also added indignantly that he was not purchasing a ring at the flea market, but in a salon belonging to a world-renowned jeweler.

“Have you heard perhaps that stones sometimes acquire a different shade under the impact of special radiation or, on the contrary, they temporarily lose their yellow color?” the jeweler asked me.

“Yes, I heard that.”

“Well, precisely for that reason we will come back tomorrow and take one last look at the stone with fresh eyes and in bright daylight. Then we’ll buy the ring.”

I was choking with rage. How dare they not trust me! I was about to open my mouth and give them a piece of my mind. Who do they think they are, these two bastards with faces which testified to their being “individuals of Caucasian ethnicity”, but I contained my anger. And as it later turned out, that was the right thing to do.



I did not have a wink of sleep that night. I tossed and turned in bed. I got up, had a cigarette and went back to bed, but sleep wouldn’t come. I made conjectures, assumptions, calculations, I analyzed the minutest details in the behavior of my customers from the day before.

Over and over again I recalled our conversations, the long kid leather trench coats, which the two men never took off during their visit, the absence of any business cards or telephone numbers, their failure to mention their last names, the strange and lengthy procedure involved in cleaning the ring, the little bottle and the magnifying glass, which they left behind in the salon supposedly by accident. I also recalled their frequent trips to the restroom, and many other similar details.

By morning the situation became thoroughly clear to me. I was undoubtedly dealing with a couple of crooks. Their goal was to lay their hands on the ring without paying anything, and our relations would never go as far as any financial transaction and recounting the stack of dollars, so that I would have absolutely no need to use any of my equipment to determine if the dollars were genuine.



Obviously, the crooks intended to leave the bottle empty for a short period of time. Since the ring “took at least a half hour bath” each time, one of them could go to the restroom during this interval and never come back. The other one could simply run away, or even remain in the salon till the very end, when the police arrived. In any case I would be unable to prove anything, and, even if the second guy is placed under arrest, they would let him out in forty-eight hours for lack of evidence (or even less than that, considering the present degree of corruption).

The trick did not work on the first day. I was very much on the alert the whole time. I was not embarrassed to check if the ring was in the bottle before we left the salon to go to the bar, the doors to the salon were securely locked each time, but I would lose some of my caution, and this is exactly what they counted on.

That is why they tried to get me accustomed to their coming and going, that is why they tried to make friends with me, to assure me of their far-reaching joint plans for the future, that is why they proposed to purchase my jewelry wholesale in order to sell it in Moscow, and even suggested opening a store there called “Ananov”, and so on and so forth. That is why they left the little bottle in the office of the salon, so that I should get used to its appearance and its presence there.

Wait! The little bottle! That was the catch! There had to be a reason why it was closed so tightly. The whole hoax was based on the fact that a different ring or an object resembling the ring in weight should be in the little bottle prior to the last “washing”. And this meant that there had to be two identical little bottles. The second bottle had not yet entered the scene of the crime, and it was to appear the next day. In the jargon of thieves, this was called a dummy. And while the dummy “was taking a bath” in the safe, “the customers” would vanish. Or else they would calmly leave the office one after the other going to the restroom, while one of them would pass the ring stolen from me to a third party. And whatever I found in the little bottle after “the washing”, whether in their presence or without, would make absolutely no difference. There would be no way I could prove that they stole the ring or exchanged it for another.

It all became clear to me. They never took off their trench coats so that they could leave at any time. It is also much easier to get the little bottle with the dummy out of a pocket of a bulky trench coat, and it is also easier to place the stolen ring there.

The outcome of this operation should occur the next morning.

I was faced with the dilemma of what I was to do in the morning. Of course, I could simply refuse to take the ring out of the safe and, giving them as an excuse some new unexpected circumstances, I could announce to them that I no longer intended to sell the ring.

But I was already too emotionally charged for that. On the one hand, I now wanted to confirm the correctness of my independent analysis of the situation, and, on the other, I

wanted to continue the dangerous game and punish the crooks, outwit them, corner them and avenge the nervous strain and loss of precious time that this whole thing had cost me.

I decided to play the party to the very end.



This time I came to the salon half an hour before the time scheduled for our meeting. I instructed Ruslan, the security guard, on what he should do, and put in my pocket the little medicine bottle, which the crooks deliberately left on the table the evening before.

A different little bottle, approximately the same size as this one, but out of transparent glass, was placed on a shelf in the cabinet. I decided to avoid any risks. The thing is that if I figured it right, the entire operation with the dummy would immediately fall through in the absence of the little medicine bottle, which they had left the previous evening. And the crooks would have to think of some excuse to explain why they couldn't make the purchase. By the way, they would have probably left the suitcase with the cash behind once again, because if their plan succeeded, they would have to tell me they were going back for the money after they had exchanged the little bottles. If something went wrong, the crooks were not risking anything except for the possibility of getting a punch in the nose.

"The customers" came exactly at the appointed time. As before, they were wearing their long kid leather trench coats. They were not carrying anything in their hands. So my first guess was right.

Givi and "the jeweler" walked into the back room. I called Ruslan and said smiling, but in a solemn voice:

"Ruslan, will you please hang these overcoats on the rack? Your coats, my friends."

My guests were slightly taken aback, but they finally took off their trench coats and handed them over to Ruslan. They noticed that the coat rack was right next to them, behind the partition, and they felt reassured.

"Please!" I made an inviting gesture. "Let's start with a cup of coffee. I was in such a hurry this morning I had not time for one."

Once again we went upstairs to the "Mezzanine" bar. I sat "my guests" down at a table in the center of a large lounge and went to the bar counter to place the order. At the counter I made a call to Ruslan using the hotel's internal communication line.

"Check their coat pockets. There should be a little bottle in one of them, looking exactly like the one which stood on the office table," I said to him.

I returned to “my guests”, but a minute later there was a phone call for me. It was from Ruslan.

“Just as you had said. There’s a little bottle in one pocket, and there’s something inside it.”

“Fine. Leave it there. Just memorize in which trench coat it is.”

We finished drinking our coffee and, continuing our lively conversation, we made for the salon.

“Well, go on, mix your combination,” I said to “the jeweler”, when we reached the office. “Ruslan, go and fetch the ring.”

“The jeweler” sat down at the table, while Ruslan, following my instructions, pretended to be opening the safe.

“Where is my little bottle?” asked “the jeweler”.

“Ruslan, where is the little bottle we left here yesterday?”

“I have no idea,” Ruslan answered in a bewildered voice. “The cleaning woman may have thrown it away... Let me take a look.”

He spent a little while searching, and then took out of the cabinet the transparent glass bottle that I had prepared.

“Here, maybe this one will do... It also has a lid...”

“The jeweler” vehemently rejected the offer. He mumbled something about the residue, about the negative impact of daylight on the mixture, and, unfortunately, the real state of affairs became painfully obvious. The play was moving towards its finale.

“Excuse my asking,” I said, “I have a question. If it has been agreed that you would come today to make your final decision, where is your money?”

Both “my guests” began to complain almost in chorus about the dangers encountered by “individuals of Caucasian ethnicity” when they move around St. Petersburg, about the high probability of their being stopped or detained by the police for document check-up, about the police taking their money or even killing them, and so on.

“I will not show you the ring unless you bring the money,” I said.

Givi and “the jeweler” understood that the hoax had failed, and they began to get ready to depart, reproaching me along the way, and even blaming me for making them lose three days of their time for no good reason.

This was too much for me.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “No matter what, but you will not leave this place empty-handed. That would be unfair, particularly since I, too, wasted three days dealing with you. And my time is precious.”

I invited Ruslan and two other managers. Perplexed, “my guests” sat down on the sofa again.

“Ruslan, please bring me the thing I spoke to you about.”

Ruslan disappeared behind the partition.

“My dear crooks! If one of you decides to do something foolish, I will immediately press this button here, and the OMON Special Forces will be here within ten seconds. So I suggest that you sit still and watch me. Here is a kid leather trench coat. Do you recognize it? Whom does it belong to?”

The owner of the coat was silent. Then “the jeweler” said:

“I think it’s mine.”

Both crooks were clearly upset.

“That’s fine. Now Ruslan, will you take a look and see if there’s anything unusual there?”

Ruslan took the little bottle out of the pocket and placed it on the table. It was obvious that there was some kind of liquid inside, with something metallic lying in it. I opened the lid. There was a smell of ammonium chloride. In the little bottle I found a ring vaguely resembling mine. I took the second bottle, which my visitors left in my office the day before, out of my pocket, placed them side-by-side, and then moved them about deftly like thimblers at a marketplace.

“You can now guess, which of the little bottles is empty and which one has the dummy inside. If you guess right, I’ll give both of them back to you for free. If you guess wrong, it’ll cost you five thousand bucks. If you try to run, I’ll call the OMON and hand you over with a protocol signed by three witnesses. And anyway, we caught you red-handed.”

The crooks didn’t utter a single word. Then “the jeweler”, feigning laughter, pointed his finger towards one of the bottle – this one. Ruslan opened the lid. There was nothing inside.

“It’s a pleasure to be dealing with a true professional!” said “the jeweler”. And he shelled up five thousand dollars.

## MONTE-CARLO

In short, the festival in the nice French town of Montelimare was in its final days.

For no apparent reason, I recently found myself wearing what could be taken for a silly smile. I was actually lost in the world of my childhood memories and the family legends about my grandfather, an incorrigible gambler, who lost his fortune and his horse-breeding factory in Monte-Carlo. So I was smiling in response to my thoughts, anticipating my visit to Monaco, the country of my youthful dreams. I was excited however not merely by the prospect of visiting the Monaco casino.

When I found myself driving a rundown Mercedes, totally not a luxury piece, on the Casino Square in front of the Hôtel de Paris in the center of Monte-Carlo, surrounded by comfort and glamour, I was slightly taken aback, feeling unusually small and insignificant.

Fancy cars designed to individual order were scurrying on either side of me. I was in the midst of this noisy public, a reputable and content elite in tuxedos and diamonds. Long-legged Hollywood beauties strolled past me. It was a sunny day, a cool light breeze was blowing from the sea. The sweet music of freedom reached me from every direction.

I felt as if I were a stray mutt, without a pedigree, who had accidentally found himself at a show exhibiting purebred lap dogs.

All this made me a little sad, but I regained my self-control, parked my limousine, which had known better days, outside the view of the important-looking bell boy, and ambled leisurely towards the hotel, as if I were a millionaire out for a stroll.



I rented an expensive suite at the Hôtel de Paris and unpacked my modest belongings. Then I went to bathroom, which looked more like a living room, jumped into the frothy water and started to think.

I did not know a soul here. There was only one thing I knew – I could become famous in this heaven, inhabited by snobs and millionaires, only by the fruits of my labor – the collection of my jewelry – plus my bit of healthy Russian adventurism.

But how was I to begin?

A knock on the door interrupted my reverie. The spic-and-span, perfectly trained waiter placed a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket on the table, put an envelope against the side of the bucket and vanished, moving politely across the room with his rear to the open bathroom doors.

This was a standard gesture made by the hotel in welcoming a new client. True enough, the price of the champagne would either be added to my final charge for the hotel, or else had initially been estimated as part of the overall cost of the suite. The envelope contained the director's business card, on which the manager on duty scribbled a few polite words of welcome.

An idea struck me.

I took out an Easter egg, an exact replica of the one Mrs. Sobchak showed the Frenchmen at the cocktail party in Paris, wrote how happy I was with my stay at the Hôtel de Paris on my business card, and sent the Easter egg and the card to the director with a courier.

If the director is there, he will be sure to give me a call. Because I was no doubt the first idiot who sent him a precious gift in response to a standard bottle of champagne.

In anticipation of the call I unpacked my collection and organized something like an impromptu exhibition in my suite.



As I had expected, the hotel director called me shortly afterwards. The rest was a matter of experience.

The director invited me for a cup of coffee, and I invited him to my "opening day".

The director was dumbfounded. He studied the jewelry with genuine interest and said:

"I know who you need to meet. You need to meet Andre Rolfo Fontana. It's his field of expertise. I will be happy to introduce you."

Monsieur Rolfo Fontana supervised all the exhibitions in the Principality of Monaco and was a close friend of the Crown Prince Rainier III.

Monsieur Fontana soon arrived, accompanied by a blond assistant. He indeed had the appearance of a man of some weight. With a look of importance he examined the collection, then he plopped on the armchair and stretched out his legs. The room filled with the odor of his expensive perfume. His entire posture implied that he was a recognizable authority here in the principality.

"What can I say, Mister Ananov, you own a fairly good collection of pieces by Faberge," he finally uttered in the voice of an expert.

“How could you identify the author so fast?” I exclaimed with feigned admiration.

“I have seen a lot in my time,” Monsieur Fontana smiled condescendingly, clearly pleased with himself.

“I feel extremely flattered by your appraisal, and I am a little embarrassed to admit it, but I have to tell you that these aren’t works by Faberge. They are works by Ananov, and they were executed recently in Russia.”

The conceited smile on Monsieur Fontana’s face faded slightly. He even seemed to have blushed a little. But a moment later he got over his embarrassment and bowed to me elegantly. “Accept my congratulations”, he said.

At the end of my visit I received an invitation to bring my collection of jewelry to Monte-Carlo during the Russian Christmas, which Monaco celebrated in the years of Soviet power. I was invited for a period of ten days with all the expenses taken care of by the government. Two days later a photograph of me, standing in front of my jewelry collection, and a large laudatory article appeared in color on the best last page of the most prestigious newspaper on the oceanfront, “Nice-Matin”, in the column titled “Stars of the Season”. Looking at the picture, readers could see a respectable gentleman in a white suit, a man who knows his worth and who is more than appropriate for the above-mentioned newspaper column.

Monsieur Andre Rolfo Fontana turned out to be a true gentleman.

My first exhibition in Monte-Carlo in December 1991-January 1992 was a great success, and I was invited to come again the following year. This happened in part because of the enthusiastic response of the public, in part because Andre was a truly decent man, in part because of the involvement of our new friend Prince Louis de Poliniac, regrettably now deceased, and partly because of the gift our firm specially designed for the Crown Prince of Monaco Rainier III, presented on my behalf by the selfsame charismatic Rolfo Fontana.

Anyway, I continued taking Monte-Carlo by storm. My highest summit was the Ball of the Red Cross.



It was already 1994. By that time I had very strong positions in Monte-Carlo. I had become an insider in the highest circles. I had had three exhibitions in the Principality. In the spring I had won specious recognition at the Ball of the Roses, when my firm designed and executed the symbol and the First Prize of the Ball. It was a rose made of

cacholong, a white stone, which is a variety of opal, with leaves out of green nephritis and a gold stem decorated with diamonds, standing in an alpine crystal vase.

Now on August 5<sup>th</sup>, three days before my birthday, I expected to reach the very pinnacle of my rise to fame in Monte-Carlo. I was to walk upon the stage during the Red Cross Charity Ball, held on August 5<sup>th</sup>, and in a solemn ceremony present the lucky winner with the Grand Prize of the Ball, raffled during the charitable lottery. The prize was a specially designed Easter egg, executed in the best traditions of Faberge and Ananov, and approved by Crown Prince Albert himself as the Grand Prize.

I came up with this idea a while ago, when I attended the previous year's ball as a guest.

And even though during this visit I was invited to attend the private cocktail party held by Princess Carolina, which was a special honor, and during the supper I was placed across the table from Prince de Poliniac, which was also a great honor, I still experienced feelings close to those I had during my first visit to Monte-Carlo.

Everyone in this hall with its three thousand idle fat cats was looking at somebody other than me, applauding somebody other than me, and in general had no idea that I was even present at the ball.

I considered this to be a personal affront. The audience applauded the Cartier Company, which presented an ordinary diamond necklace to the lottery, the Repossi Company, which donated an even less noteworthy gold bracelet, and Carl Lagerfeldt, who placed more than average perfume on the tables.

I leaned over the table towards Prince de Poliniac and handed him a drawing I had just made on the other side of the menu.

“What is this?” he asked.

“This is an Easter Egg with a red cross made out of a ruby – my gift for the next year's Ball.”

“And what's inside?”

“A surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“That's a secret.”

The elderly prince pouted his lips.



Actually, I just didn't have time to come up with an idea.

But now, when he found me unprepared, an idea immediately occurred to me and I found a way out.

"It's a secret, but not from you, dear Prince," I smiled. "Inside the egg there will be a folding construction out of five tiny frames with miniature pictures of members of your brother's family. Only let's keep it strictly between the two of us. Promise?"

"Oh, Count! How could you doubt me... It's a spectacular idea. I will speak with Albert at once. Tell me, how much will the egg cost?"

"It won't cost the Ball organizers anything. It will be my gift."

"But how much would it be worth?" the old man insisted.

"No less than half a million francs."

"Very well, I'll talk it over with Albert at once."



Before the dinner was over, half of those present at the Ball already knew that the gentlemen at that table over there was Count Ananov, and he had just made a present to Crown Prince Rainier III: five gold portraits, worth a million francs each. And while this myth increased in geometric proportions as it spread across the hall, Prince Albert already agreed to all my suggestions and asked me to send him my sketches. I in turn asked him to pose for me to make rough drafts of the proposed miniature and also to set up a meeting so I could make drawing of other family members. I also asked that he supply me with different photographs of the Prince and the Princesses.

Three days later I was invited to the Palace. I had the pleasure of an exhaustive conversation with Prince Rainier, an extremely intelligent and charming person who was later destined to play a very important role in my family's life. I also spoke with beautiful Princess Carolina, discussed the project in greater detail with Prince Albert and was given a series of photographs for the miniature portraits. Being invited to the Palace was an exceptional honor.

Work on the gift continued the whole winter. Nina Klein, a wonderfully talented miniature artist did a very good job of painting the family's portraits on thin strips of mammoth bone. The sketch of the Easter egg was printed on the cover of the booklet advertising the Ball.

In May I was supposed to show the finished miniatures to Prince Rainier, after which we could complete the work on the piece.

However, a terrible misfortune struck my family two weeks before the date scheduled for my visit to the Prince.



As usual, after spending some time working at the shop, I drove to our salon at the Europa Hotel. On the way I stopped over at our house for a cup of coffee. My wife asked me to drop by at the pharmacy on my way home in the evening and get some medications for Nastya, our younger daughter, who seemed to be developing a bad cold.

I barely entered the salon, when I got a phone call from my wife.

“Hurry... Nastya is dying...,” she said and broke into tears.

Five minutes later I was already at home. It was a horrifying sight. Nastya had rolled her eyes upwards, and her entire body was shaking with convulsions. Two doctors who had arrived in an ambulance were bustling by the little girl’s bedside.

It turned out that a special ambulance with a pediatric IC unit was required, but it was impossible to get one to come.

I dialed the number of the IC unit.

The dispatcher explained to me in a dispassionate voice that the city had only two ambulances with pediatric IC units, and that one of them was now occupied and the other was far away, in Kupchino.

“Judging from what the doctors had told me, your child will die before the ambulance gets there.”

I asked to be connected with the head physician and said to him, slowly and deliberately articulating every word:

“If the child dies before the arrival of the ambulance, this will be our grief only. But if the ambulance does not arrive at all, it will be your grief too. I will come and rip you apart before the day ends. Is this clear?”

It was clear to him. The ambulance was at the house entrance fifteen minutes later.

Doctor Bondar, a wonderful specialist who came with the first ambulance, was the one who saved our year-old baby. He performed “mouth to mouth” artificial respiration, massaged the little girl’s heart and gave her necessary injections. Finally the IC unit

arrived and gave her oxygen. Nastya's cheeks gradually turned pink and she regained consciousness.

It was necessary to transport her to the hospital. But the doctors refused outright to take Nastya there in an ambulance. They were probably afraid to take responsibility. So I drove her to the hospital myself.



I will never forget the first thing that happened at the Pediatric Institute, the hospital where I brought my baby daughter.

Two hefty-looking medical nurses pressed her tiny body to the bed and the third gave her an injection with a thick needle, without using any anesthetic. They called this "a spinal puncture". I would love to take a look at the sadist who invented this horrible procedure. The child cried pitifully and helplessly, while I clutched by fists and gritted my teeth. I'll remember this scene for as long as I live.

Finally, after being given a combined diagnosis of encephalitis, meningitis and dropsy of the brain, little Nastya remained at the hospital with her mother, where the poor child was tortured for ten days with various painful medical procedures. She was injected with an enormous amount of different powerful drugs. The dull medical personnel pierced the entire surface of her thin little arms with dull needles.

It was painful to watch all this.

It was time for me to fly to Monaco for the scheduled meeting with Prince Rainier III. After days of deliberation, I decided to go.

The Prince met me in his office at the Palace. He scrutinized the miniatures, which I brought with me very thoroughly and was clearly pleased with what he saw. He gave his final approval for the complete assembly of the Easter egg, and, in parting, he asked me politely:

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, Monsieur. My daughter is very ill. It's a terrible misfortune. I urgently need to have a consultation with the best possible pediatric doctors."

Fifteen minutes later the Prince's personal physician was knocking on the door of my suite, apologizing that he had been unable to arrive even earlier. The next day my wife flew in from St. Petersburg, bringing with her all of Nastya's medical records and computerized tests. The best pediatricians of France who participated in the consultation analyzed the test results and unanimously pronounced their verdict:

“There is no encephalitis.”

“There is no meningitis.”

“There is no dropsy of the brain.”

“But what is it, then?”

“It is the strong reaction of a small child to high fever and criminal incompetence on the part of physicians who overmedicated the little girl with enormous doses of unnecessary and even harmful drugs.”

Five minutes after the consultation I called the hospital and, taking full responsibility for the outcome, instructed the staff to discontinue all injections and treatments.

Little Nastya recently turned six. Her mother absolutely adores her, and she truly is a lovely little girl: good-natured and affectionate, with blue eyes and slightly curly ash blond hair.

Our older daughter Anya and I magnanimously forgive my wife’s overflowing love for Nastya. Though honestly, once in a while we experience pangs of jealousy

## **FATHER**

Piercing the morning stillness I could hear the phone ringing endlessly in the hallway. My wife answered the call. I continued to lie in bed, unable to get up after drinking one too many the evening before.

I cannot explain how, but I immediately knew what had happened. It was my mother calling.

We did not have a car at the time. We probably got there in a cab. I honestly don’t remember. I only remember that all the way I was praying to God:

“Let it be a mistake. Let him be alive. Don’t let him die!”

But I knew already how it happened.

When we arrived, there was nothing unusual near the building, from the side of the backyard. And there was nobody around. No idle onlookers, who typically assemble in situations like this, no ambulances. Nobody. So I became hopeful again.

It must have been a mistake. Some kind of mistake.

We walked around the building, and I saw several people near the entrance. They were standing there, gazing at something.

No, it wasn't a mistake.

But there was no one lying on the ground. There was only a small puddle of blood by the entrance. We walked inside and found the door to our fourth floor apartment open. There was a group of strangers in the kitchen.

I asked where he was in a calm voice that was not my own.

"Down there." The people nodded in the direction of the staircase window. I went to the window and looked down.

My father was lying face down on the concrete slab above the entrance to the apartment building.

Some of the details of that day are erased from my memory. This is probably how it should be.

I remember giving instructions, sending people away on different errands, paying money, looking for a rope that I needed to lower father's body from the entrance awning to the ground.

Two men in the kitchen, who turned out to be preliminary investigators (there job was to record the suicide), were standing by the refrigerator, waiting for something.

"Hey, man, do you know if they have any alcohol?"

I got out a bottle of vodka.

The guy who helped me lower dad's body from the concrete slab was a fireman. He also loafed around by my side and mumbled something like: "It's not our business to deal with suicides... Our business is to put out fires..."

I gave him some money.

I remember somebody saying: "Don't let the woman come out of the house..."

But she came out anyway, and, without saying anything, she got on her knees onto the ground next to dad's body. We all stood on our knees next to dad, our whole family. Mother and Nikita cried silently. Somebody came up to us. It was the neighbors. I sent them away. The nail on dad's right hand was blue.

Onlookers stood a few steps away. They didn't talk.

Then a van arrived. I asked the men responsible for delivering the body to allow me to accompany father to the morgue.

The men seemed concerned. They said they were not allowed to do that. I gave them some money. They let me come along.

It was a hot autumn day. A crowd of people had gathered near the morgue. There was no free space in the refrigerators. No place to put the bodies. Several women were crying, begging the male attendants to do something about it.

I found the head attendant and introduced myself to him. He told me his name. Georgi Davidovich. An eerie coincidence.

My dad's name was also Georgi Davidovich.

"Accept your namesake," I said. And I offered him some money.

Occasionally taking a sip out of the flask, which lay in the inner pocket of my jacket, I gave out clear and meticulous instructions, taking care of all the necessary formalities.

Three days later all the relatives and co-workers assembled by the morgue at the appointed hour. The funeral parlor looked more like a reception area. People were coming and going, bringing in coffins and carrying out their dead. Ten or even twelve families were saying their last good-bye to the deceased at the same time.

I offered Georgi Davidovich some more cash, and he closed the morgue for forty minutes or so. As I had instructed them, I alone was summoned when the coffin with dad's body was brought out of the room, where the dead were prepared and dressed for the burial, and placed on a special pedestal.

Two male attendants were walking back and forth near the coffin. One of them was an elderly man who looked as if he was never sober; the other was a young man, obviously a novice.

Father was dressed in a suit. The cover of the coffin stood near by. His face had an uncanny grayish tone; there was a badly concealed bruise on his forehead, and a trickle of dark blood had oozed out of his ear onto the white spread. His skull was cut open in the back and sewn together with thick black thread.

"You guys, what did you use to make him up?"

The men showed me a carton with theater make-up.

I took the carton and began working. The old man muttered something...

“Learn the skill while I’m still around,” I said curtly. He left me alone and started watching me, chattering something non-stop – some kind of jokes or plain gibberish.

As I had done years before in make-up classes at the Theatre Institute, I first placed an accurate layer of Vaseline on my dad’s face and only then started covering it with toner.

“Yea, bad bruising...” the old man droned behind my back. “Who is he to you, someone from work?”

I was finishing the overall tone in silence.

“Is he an acquaintance or what,” the old man was not about to give up.

“He is my dad.”

Without a hurry, I finished applying the make-up.

The male attendant fell silent and did not say a word till the very end. Perhaps it was a scary scene for an observer.

When I had completed the job, I called for mother and Nikita. Mother cried her eyes out, but later she was composed, not allowing herself to give expression to her feelings.

We then opened the doors and let in everyone else.

That day I gave up drinking.

## FAMILY ALBUM

### *Photo 1*

David Georgiyevich Ananov,  
Andrei Ananov’s grandfather  
on his father’s side  
1910

### *Photo 2*

Olga Nikitichna Ananova,  
Andrei Ananov’s grandmother  
on his father’s side  
1910

*Photo 3*

Nikolai Alexandrovich Mezentsev,  
Andrei Ananov's grandfather  
on his mother's side  
1911

*Photo 4*

Vera Dmitriyevna Mezentseva,  
Andrei Ananov's grandmother  
on his mother's side  
1911

*Photo 5*

Father  
Georgi Davidovoch Ananov  
1936

*Photo 6*

Mother  
Yelena Nikolayevna Ananova  
1936

*Photo 7*

Andrei Ananov, 1946

*Photo 8*

Andrei with his mother, 1950

*Photo 9*

Student years  
Andrei Ananov - a junior at the Physics Department  
of the Leningrad State University, 1962



*Photo 10*

Actor at the Novgorod Drama Theater  
Andrei Ananov, 1967

*Photo 11*

Nadya Pavlova, 1968

*Photo 12*

During the filming of V. Derbenev's movie "The Knight"  
1967

*Photo 13*

Second marriage  
Stella Arbaji-Ananova  
1975

*Photo 14*

Underground jeweler with his guilloche machine  
1979

*Photo 15*

Larissa. 1997

*Photo 16*

Bunny Rabbit. 1993

*Photo 17*

Andrei. 1997

*Photo 18*

Larissa. 1997

*Photo 19*

The Mercedes won at a Monte-Carlo casino  
South of France. 1993

*Photo 20*

At an international racing contest in Germany. 1993

*Photo 21*

The star waltz at the Red Cross Charity Ball  
Monte-Carlo. 1997

*Photo 22*

Monte-Carlo. 1997

*Photo 23*

At the workshop. “Church of Christ the Savior” has been completed.  
Andrei Ananov with jewelers from his firm: A. Petrov, N. Davidov and A. Shevchenko  
1997

*Photo 24*

Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexii II next to the “Church of Christ the Savior” at  
the presentation of the firm’s works at the residence of the Patriarch.  
Moscow. 1997

*Photo 25*

“Church of Christ the Savior”

This work was the first in the series of Grand Easter Eggs: “Churches of Russia”  
1997

*Photo 26.*

New baby in the family. Nastya was born in 1993.

*Photo 27*

Anya and Nastya. 1998

*Photo 28*

Four different characters. 1998

*Photo 29*

Dimitri Likhachev and Andrei Ananov at the Gala Party in honor of the Centennial Jubilee of the Russian Museum. 1998.

*Photo 30*

At the workshop

A. Ananov, A. Shevchenko and V. Ratushev. 1994

*Photo 31*

Grand Easter Egg. “Isaakievsky Cathedral”. Fragment. 1999.

*Photo 32*

Grand Easter Egg. “XXI century”. 1999

*Photo 33*

Grand Easter Egg in honor of the Patriarch. 1999.

*Photo 33*

Andrei Ananov with his daughter Anya on the day he received the Grand European Gold Medal. Genoa. 1992.

*Photo 34*

Chambers of the French Academy. Visiting the legendary Maurice Druon. Paris. 1995.

*Photo 35*

On a Paris street...

*Photo 36*

...and at home in St. Petersburg. 1998.

*Photo 37*

“Mosque”. 1998.

*Photo 38*

Grand Easter Egg. “Peacock”. 1998.

*Photo 39*

In the Foyer of the Moscow Conservatoire  
Andrei Ananov shows the Eggs Collection to Naina Yeltsin. 1998.

*Photo 40*

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at the Mariinsky Palace in St. Petersburg  
Andrei Ananov is presenting the Queen with the “Blackberry Branch”  
St. Petersburg. 1994

*Photo 41*

Madame Chirac, wife of President of France, attending Andrei Ananov's exhibition Paris. 1995.

*Photo 42*

Her Majesty Queen of Spain Sophia attending Andrei Ananov's exhibition Madrid 1993.

*Photo 43*

"Bird with Scales". 1997.

*Photo 48*

Grand Easter Egg with a Clock. 1997.

*Photo 49*

Andrei and Larissa Ananov with their daughters Anya and Nastya. 1997.

*Photo 50*

"What is our Life?.."

Looking at an acting miniature model of a roulette in the store-salon at Grand-Hotel Europa. 1995.

*Photo 51*

Two Magicians

Andrei Ananov and David Copperfield. 1998.

*Photo 52*

50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. 1995.

Photo 53

“Roses”

These are not artificial flowers.

They are masterfully executed stone flowers

*Photo 54*

Mr. S. Tsiplyayev, Representative of the President of Russia in St. Petersburg (on the right), at the opening of the “Ananov” jewelry salon (31 Nevsky Avenue). 1999.

*Photo 55*

Andrei and Larissa Ananov at the opening of the salon next to “Resurrection Cathedral” (“Cathedral of Our Savior”). 1999.

*Photo 56*

Grand Easter Egg “Resurrection Cathedral” (“Cathedral of Our Savior”). 1999.

*Photo 57*

Dreams and reality

Jewelry items by the Ananov Company can now be purchased in the heart of jewelry Europe. Paris. 2 Vendome Square. 1995

**Photos in the Family Album:**

G. Paumann

Heidi Moretti

Regina Piuntener

Emanuel Skorceletti

Larissa Ananov

Alexander Belenky

Igor Borodin

## TWENTY THREE MAXIMUM

The ball landed on the number *twenty-three*.

The croupier raked in the losing chips. Only one bet remained on the table in anticipation of payment. But what a bet it was!

“Vingt-trois carre, cheval et plein,” the croupier announced, which in French meant “twenty three in total”.

This meant that all the chips on the number *twenty-three* and around it had won, which amounted to a total of two hundred seventy thousand French francs.

Those who lost the game were waiting with jealousy to find out the lucky winner.

I was the lucky winner.

I did my best to keep a straight face and remain dignified, presenting myself as a man accustomed to winning and losing. But my heart was pounding frantically, and I am afraid that my face could have lost some of its noble pallor when I was receiving my winning bet

“Messieurs, faites vos jeux,” the croupier reminded the players. “Gentlemen, make your bets.”

...It was as if the people around me had ceased to exist. The palms of my hands were covered with sweat, while the wheel of the roulette was turning feverishly in my brain. With my inner sight I suddenly saw the ball bouncing up and down and then it once again landed on the number *twenty-three*.

This was unthinkable, unreal and impossible. Such things happen extremely rarely. But they do happen. And obeying some mysterious force that was pushing me into the abyss, I said in a hoarse voice:

“Vingt-trois maximum.” Twenty-three maximum. And I threw two counters, worth a hundred thousand francs each, to the croupier.

This meant that I was adding the maximum amount to the winning bet, which remained on the table. In other words, I was adding four thousand to the center, ten thousand each to the “cheval” and twenty two thousand each to the “carre”. The bet on the number *twenty-three* and around it was now a hundred fifty thousand francs.

The croupier, an old-timer, smiled at me with the welcoming smile of the devil – before him was the next victim of his hellish enterprise. Time dragged endlessly and painfully. All the bets were made, at long last, and the ball started to spin swiftly around the slowly revolving wheel.

I was unable to stand the strain any longer and walked away from the table, making my way with difficulty through the crowd of players and on-lookers.

I went to the far corner of the casino and looked at my reflection in the mirror. I saw before me a fit, well-groomed gentleman in a tuxedo whose eyes were shiny with excitement but who overall had a rather pleasant face.

“”What can I say,” I told myself, “you have the heart of a gambler, my friend. You could have easily left, taking with you two hundred seventy thousand francs. But no, without much ado, you had to throw all this money to the wind. What are you hoping for, you idiot! Do you expect a miracle? You silly boy! Take away at least the hundred thousand or so that’s left! And anyway, it’s time to get out of here. No more winning for you in this place.”

I hindered by the doors, which led into the hall and started looking from a distance at the electronic screen above the table. The column of numbers suddenly gave a jolt and started moving upwards. A new winning number appeared on the screen.

I could tell it was a red number. It clearly consisted of two digits. If it is twenty-five or twenty-seven, it means that I have one “carre”, which, in turn, means that I got my money back and even won an extra forty two thousand.

I slowly walked towards the gambling table.

At this moment the players whose backs were concealing the roulette from my view, began to look around as if they were trying to spot someone down. I realized that something completely out of the ordinary had happened, and my heart missed a beat.

When they saw me, the players made way for me in silence. They had such a look as if they were expecting somebody to bring in a corpse. An older lady suddenly broke the silence by laughing hysterically ...

There was only one bet left on the otherwise empty table.

“Vingt-trois carre, cheval et plein.”



Something impossible had happened. My fate winked at me approvingly. Probably the devil, who clearly owned this place, missed what was going on, or else he was engaged in a perilous game with me, trying to get hold of my soul.

The people around the table were silent. Looking askance, I noticed players at other tables leaving their game and running towards us. They were running to see what kind of the money somebody else had won.

I cannot tell you how much all the people who had assembled in the gorgeous antique hall hated me at that instant. Mind you, it was a feeling that united people who were by no means poor themselves. I cannot tell you how overjoyed I was! I, a Russian, who had miraculously survived the grinding machine of Soviet reality, grabbed my fate by the horns and managed to completely subdue it. Look at me, you rotten millionaires! You would have never dared to place a maximum bet twice in a row. You don't have the guts for it. Only we, Russians, are capable of something like that! We inherited this gumption from our ancestors! And you never inherited anything like it, and never will!

Watch me carefully. I will now finish you off. And you, bastards, will never get over this blow.

I made a sign to the croupier. He understood what I wanted and called the manager on duty, and the latter called someone else, who came with a special box. The money I had won, approximately two million francs, was placed neatly in the box and carried to the deposit department. It was like a savings bank.

"Do you intend to continue the game?" asked the croupier.

"No, I don't," I answered.

"Are you taking the bet with you?" asked the croupier.

"No," I answered. "You are taking it with you. It's your tip."

"Monsieur, that's a lot of money... Who are you?"

"I am Russian."

I walked out of the casino. All the croupiers stood at attention watching me leave.



My grandfather died in the early twenties, in the town of Knyaginino, knowing very little about the Bolshevik Revolution. He was a brilliant officer, an aristocrat and a gambler. When I was a little boy I found my grandmother's archives in the attic – letters that had

grown yellow with age, photographs and postcards hidden in a wooden chest. One of the postcards had a grand beautiful building on the front with a signature underneath: “Casino Monte-Carlo, 1912”. On the back side, written in grandfather’s hand in black ink, were the following lines: “Ma chere, don’t be upset, everything that happens is for the better. I am sorry but I lost out horses at vingt-trois. But it was God’s will. Oats have lately become so expensive...”

My mother told me that we had a horse-breeding factory somewhere, more than two hundred select stallions. Grandfather lost them during one night’s gambling.

For the rest of my life I remembered the grand building on the postcard, the signature underneath: “Casino Monte-Carlo, 1912”, and the number *twenty-three* – vingt-trois, which cost my grandfather his family’s horse-breeding business. Though I have to admit that grandfather was right, when he said that it was all for the better. Five years later the Bolsheviks would have expropriated the horse-breeding factory anyway.

I often thought about grandfather and how he lost these horses gambling. I imagined him in a white tuxedo or in uniform, but definitely wearing something white, entering the grandiose building with a light step, and dropping his gloves into his soft felt hat or his military cap, which the attendant obligingly takes away from him. Then, handsome and well built, he carries his head high as he strolls lightly into the gambling hall. He takes out a long cigarette with his slender fingers, lights it, inhales the fine smoke and, placing down his glass of champagne, tells the croupier nonchalantly: “Vingt-trois maximum”. And with a dazzling smile he looks into the face of a lady in a white hat sitting across the table.

Should I even try to describe to you how fast my heart beat when in 1992 I approached the outskirts of Monte-Carlo for the first time in an old Mercedes, which I had borrowed from a friend. I did not tell my wife about it. I was going for a rendezvous with my childhood, with my grandfather, who had lived in my imagination for so long. I wanted to inhale the sweet tobacco smell of the casino, and walk into the grandiose building with my head held high, so that I could say some day to myself: “I was in that place where he had been. I had the same feelings that he had. I continued the passage of time. Dear grandfather, you were right about everything. You lived your life with zest and you died, without experiencing any shame. And everything that happens is for the better.”

Ignoring the advice of my thrifty friend I did not rent a room in a dingy second-class hotel, but a suite at the Hôtel de Paris, though it was extremely expensive and I was by no means a wealthy man in those days. (One might say I am still not that wealthy.)

I did not have any specific plan of action. I simply came here in order to conquer Monte-Carlo. I was lucky. I met with the right people, made arrangements for my first exhibition in Monaco, gave an interview to a prestigious local newspaper, and on the second day of my visit I went to purchase a white tuxedo, preparing myself for a visit to the casino. The

white tuxedo was remarkably becoming, and I became a long-time customer of the store belonging to the “Jean-Jacques” Clothes Company.

I placed about one thousand dollars in one pocket – which was the amount I could afford to lose – and about two hundred francs in another pocket, so that I could give the croupier a tip when I lost. After that I went to the casino.

Need I tell you that I only betted on “vingt-trois”, and, believe it or not, I left winning some money even during my first night at the casino, not a lot of money, but an amount several times greater than my “initial investment”. When I returned to my hotel suite I began analyzing my game in an effort to understand why I did not win more, considering my tremendous luck.

I came to the conclusion that my bets were too small.

The next day I put all the money I had won the previous night in my pocket and started making bets ten times higher than I did before. I told myself that I had not earned the money, I simply won it, and therefore there was no reason why I should regret losing it.

Everything that happens is for the better.

That night I won more than twenty eight thousand dollars and became a gambler.

I wandered around Monte-Carlo – judging by appearances, a calm gentleman without a worry in the world – sipping coffee unhurriedly as I sat under the umbrellas of street bistros, smiling at passers-by, looking around me with eyes that were shiny with excitement – but in truth I couldn’t see a thing.

I was gambling.

And if on the surface I appeared to be calm and unhurried, inside of me things were quite different. Refusing to calm down, my blood pulsed in spurts my veins: my nerves were taught as violin strings and seemed to be quietly reverberating. Over and over again I bet on *twenty-three*, as if I was rewinding backwards the film about the casino. Once again I wavered; I reached out to place a thousand on the sector with the numbers *eight, eleven, twenty-four* and *thirty*. But as I was about to place my bet, as if from the side, I could hear my hoarse voice making the unusual request, unique in its absence of any logic.

The most amazing thing was that I was drawn back to the casino. The adrenalin rush demanded an outlet; my legs turned of their own accord in the direction of the central square of Monte-Carlo. But I knew that I shouldn’t by any means play during this particular visit, because I was sure to lose. And it was not merely a question of money, but that it would ruin my holiday mood. It was also a little uncomfortable. It is one thing to easily win two million francs and leave without much ado, leaving a tip for the

croupier the size of his half-year's salary. But it was a totally different thing to come back, confirming my dependence on the ethereal magnetism of easy money.

But the adrenalin rushed to my head notwithstanding, exciting my soul and demanding an outlet. I had to think of something and take my mind off the gambling.

The sounds of Vivaldi's concert for the violin reached me through the open window. Images following each other as if on film seemed to be a continuation of the music: a violin, the old American movie "Rhapsody", its main character, his wealthy mistress who comes to pick him up in a Mercedes. The violin player stepping over the side of the car, without opening the door of the two-seat sports coupe...

I had an idea. I will act out the dream of my youth which I could never make real – I will buy myself a luxury car and, even though I am no longer so young and elegant, I will nevertheless step over its side, even if it will be just once in my life. I will create a real memory of this crazy "vingt-trois" – I will buy myself a luxury car and drive to Paris at once, leaving this city of the devil, filled with temptations. I will get rid of the magnetic force of the casino.

I went back to the casino, and asked Jacques, the concierge, to call the garages of the world's best automobile companies.

Despite the fact that the working day was coming to an end and the weekend, a precious time for the French, was approaching, within an hour five magnificent limousines surrounded the flowerbed in front of the Hôtel de Paris. The beautiful sunny weather and the crowd of tourists completed the picture.

I walked around the cars, examining them thoroughly. Each of them was good in their own way. I walked around them, thinking.

The Rolls Royce was a white convertible and vaguely reminded me of an open coffin. No, I am not old enough to drive this hearse.

The Porsche was black, small and low to the ground, but it was somehow too playful, intended for a young crowd. A car for snotty millionaires.

Then there came the Ferrari – a dazzling, fashionable car, but somehow very indecent. I found it to be overwhelmingly obnoxious.

The Jaguar. A fantastic car. We, Soviet people, knew the Jaguar like our own five fingers from Hemingway's novels. But still, the Mercedes...

Designed low to the ground, like a charming frog sitting on her hind legs, superbly elegant, with an iridescent dark cherry exterior, an automatically removable metallic roof, which could turn it into a convertible in a matter of seconds and an automatically opening

leather tent – it was exactly what its brand name suggested – a “star of the road”. And, mind you, it was possible to get into the driver’s seat by elegantly stepping over the side of the car, without opening the door.

A two-seat monster with a four hundred horsepower engine, the materialization of a dream, the main character of youthful fancies.

I made my choice. I forgot to inquire about the price I was so anxious to get behind the wheel. I wanted to ask the salesman: “Sir, could you let me take it for a drive.” And I asked him. He said “Yes”. So I sat behind the wheel, and we drove slowly and solemnly down the streets of Monte-Carlo, past the passers-by who were gazing jealously in our stead, past the politely smiling cops, and towards the azure sea.

The salesman of the Mercedes-Benz Company, who was sitting next to me in the car, a slightly cheeky Italian chap, was doing his best to appear dignified and proper. But even so, once in a while I could hear in his voice the unpleasant notes of his assumed superiority over that Russian. I could sense his well-hidden indignation over the fact that I was the future owner of the car while he was serving me, and not *vice versa*.

A diabolical plan developed in my mind. I wanted revenge. I created in my imagination the final scene of the show, which had started at the casino. According to all the canons of classical art this play was supposed to have its finale at the casino.

“Well. I’m buying this car. Quote me the price.”

He named the amount. He clearly added about twenty percent, thinking that I was going to bargain. But I didn’t.

“On Monday, if you still want to do it,” the Mercedes guy said, taunting me again, “we’ll finalize the purchase.”

“We’ll finalize it right now,” I said in a tone allowing no objection.

“But the banks are closed now. It’s already too late.”

“Won’t you accept cash?”

“We do...” the Mercedes guy squeezed out the words in a wavering puzzled voice.

“Let’s go then.”

We parked the car and walked in the direction of the hotel.

My plan was based on the fact that my yield was kept at the casino’s deposit department. It could be retrieved within sixty seconds, but in the form of counters, not cash. It was

enough to make a sign to the croupier and sign your name in your personal card. All this could be done without leaving the gambling table.

We entered the square and turned towards the casino.

The Mercedes guy followed me submissively, probably thinking that I was taking him to the hotel's safe facility. But when he saw the stairs of the casino in front him, he began to show signs of discomfort.

"Let's go, move it," I egged him on.

"What for?" The salesman could not understand what I was up to.

"It won't take long. Some five or ten minutes. I won't need more time to win ...what was the car's exact price you said? Then I'll give you the money."

The Mercedes salesman flew into a rage. The disdain he felt for this Russian idiot, confusion, regret for the ruined weekend and many other similarly unpleasant emotions were written in large print all over his obnoxious face.

I dragged him into the casino almost by force.

"Stand here right next to me, it won't take long. No more than ten minutes..."

I took some money out of my pocket and started playing. The Mercedes guy stood there, his body language indicating exactly what he thought of me.

About five minutes later I pretended that I had run out of cigarettes, and I sent him to the bar to get some Marlboros.

The rest was a matter of expertise.

While he was gone an attendant brought me my counters from the deposit department. In addition, by the time the salesman was back with the cigarettes I had won another full bet on *thirty-two*.

A stack of counters each worth a hundred thousand francs lay on the table beside me. I raked in my current yield of a hundred thirty four thousand together with the rest.

"You see, I told you..." I said with soft reproach. "It only took ten minutes. And you doubted my words..."

The salesman was rooted to the spot. He stared dully at the counters, at the gambling table; then he looked behind his back for some reason, as if trying to make sure that all this was not a dream. He was moving his lips soundlessly – it was unclear if he was

praying, swearing to himself or attempting to compare the amount I had won with his annual income.

“Let’s go,” I rose from the table, shoving the counters into my pockets.

He shuffled after me to the cashier, who spent quite a while counting out my cash. It was then placed into two paper bags no different from the ones used for packing potatoes at the supermarket. While we were waiting, I asked the salesman:

“So how many horse powers is the engine?”

“About four hundred.”

“What can I say? My grandfather lost a horse-breeding factory gambling here about a hundred years ago. Today I won back two hundred choice stallions. Do you get me, my friend?”

“My friend” nodded his head readily as if he were a rag doll and smiled deferentially. He had completely given up on his ability to understand any of this. Once in a while, he continued to move his lips as if chewing on something.

An hour later, after stepping elegantly over the side of the car, I was already speeding at two hundred sixty kilometers an hour in the direction of Paris, towards my wife who was flying there from St. Petersburg and had no idea about the events of the last few days, and towards the lucky fate that was awaiting me.

Waving his wings, my guardian angel was barely able to keep up with me.

## **VALYA PAVLOVA**

We met at the Lenfilm Studios, in the summer. That year I had just finished my first year at the producer’s department of the Leningrad Theater Institute. I was only a youngster, though I was twenty-three.

She had graduated the same institute six years earlier, and had had jobs at some of the largest theaters in Russia. She was around thirty.

That day we had pawned Valya’s watch for a bottle of vodka and woke up in the morning to find ourselves on a folding bed in the kitchen of an actor friend of ours. After that night, we stayed together for five years.

I got myself transferred to the correspondence section of the producer’s department, and we tried to find jobs together wherever they were available – on the radio, on the TV and in the movies. Then we left Leningrad to work in theaters first in Kazan and then in

Petrozavodsk. For some time Valya had a job at the Drama and Comedy Theater on Liteiny in the center of Leningrad, but then she started having problems with the chief producer and had to leave.

We had a hard life, but also a beautiful and a joyful one. We were sometimes “rich” after we had received our fee for the so-called “New Years” campaign”, where I was Grandfather Frost, the Russian Santa Claus, and Valya was the Snow Maiden. Then we would go to the restaurant, always the same one – on the second floor of the Europa Hotel. But we were usually poor, doing our best to make the money last between paydays. There were times when we had no money at all. When this happened, we would go to the market and steal fruit, mushrooms and flowers. We laughed our heads off at home, recalling the incidents at the market, interrupting each other to comment on the other’s behavior. It was a kind of game for us, like doing a part in a play or sketch. Valya sometimes played the part of a carefree, spoiled young wife who was throwing money around, while I was the stern, well-to-do husband, who was prepared to reprimand her once in a while, saying:

“Put it back. That’s enough. You’ve already spent your day’s allowance of a thousand, which you get for you silly little whims!”

And Valya would put the flowers down “obediently”, while the salesman stood with his mouth open, looking with jealousy after the “millionaires” as they walked away. No wonder! In those days you could buy a used car with a thousand rubles.

But as a rule Valya kept the flowers, and then we would stage the second act of the comedy. We would select a handsome Georgian with the most typical appearance from among the fruit salesmen, and Valya would begin the trick. Improvising easily on the way, she would initiate a conversation with the salesman, and in the end the Georgian would get the flowers and Valya would leave with a bag-full of fruit. On occasion, if things went wrong, I would appear on the scene, saying:

“Take it easy. The Lenfilm Studios are shooting a film about the life of the famous actress Pavlova. This is a rehearsal.”

After that everything was clear and the problem was resolved.

I must have loved her. Valya was a wonderful actress with a God-given talent. She had a special gift for heroic roles, which one doesn’t often find in a theater. Medea, Mary Stewart, Lady Macbeth and the part of the commissar woman in “Optimistic Tragedy” were roles made as if especially for her. Energy and passion emanated from her. She was capable of acts of daring and risk.

Something powerful attracted me to her. It must have been her talent and inner strength. I was constantly competing with her – I had to be better. But she was better in so many ways, and I continued to fight to establish my superiority. I studied at the Theater



Institute, worked at different theaters, taught classes at a theater school, and I left her for a whole month twice a year to take my winter and summer exams at the institute. She wrote me long and beautiful letters. I was nervous for no good reason. I suffered pangs of jealousy, which made me sleep with other women, so that at least for a short while I could get rid of these emotions that were tearing me apart. I wanted to be with her, and I would get terribly drunk because my feelings were spilling over. I loved and hated her all at the same time.

She ditched me when I went to Saransk to stage a play, which was part of my diploma assignment. A young guy from the corps de ballet took her away from me, only to jilt her a few weeks later. She tried to get back together with me, but I was unable to forgive what I then saw as an act of betrayal.

Later I understood her and forgave her, and I helped her out occasionally later in her life. All her life, which was both difficult and short. Probably God had punished her for some wrong. Maybe He punished her for leaving me.

But I was saved by my guardian angel. And I became a man, maybe precisely because she left me.

At the time, however, I did not know any of this, and I suffered. I suffered and drank too much.

I saw my own name for the first time ever on a theater poster – “The producer of the play is Andrei Ananov”. Similarly, for the first time ever, I received such a high one-time fee - - seven hundred rubles, a fortune in those days. Valya was waiting for me in Leningrad. It was almost New Years. 1973 was at our doorstep. We agreed that I would fly home from Saransk, where I was busy staging my play for the diploma, on December 31. Our plan was to celebrate New Year’s Eve at home, just the two of us. We talked over the phone every day, I yearned to be with her and did not suspect a thing.

I managed to get back to Leningrad one day earlier, on December 30. When I came to the apartment on the 7-aya Krasnoarmeyskaya, where we lived at the time, I did not find her there. The neighbors said that she left for her parents’ place in Vyborg the day before. This was a nearly three-hour trip by train.

I left my suitcase at home and, after filling my pockets with cash and gifts, I rushed to Vyborg, barely making it to the last night train. She was not there either. “She left for Leningrad,” my mother-in-law said, without looking at me. I understood that something was terribly wrong. I went back to Leningrad on the first train early the next morning.

I cannot explain why, but for some reason when I got off the train at the Finlyandsky Railway Station in Leningrad, I did not go to our place at 7-aya Krasnoarmeyskaya, where Valya was supposed to have been waiting for me, but I walked across the Liteiny Bridge to the old apartment, where my parents were still living. I entered my room, and

my eyes immediately spotted an envelope lying on the table. I instantly understood everything.

*“...Please forgive me, Andrei. There is nothing I can do with myself. I have fallen in love with someone else, even though I knew from the start that nothing would come of it... Please don’t try to find me. You can’t change anything. I realize that some day I will regret it terribly but right now...”*

It was an awful blow. For a while I felt as if I had gone deaf. I walked to and fro across the room, trying to comprehend what had happened.

It was nine o’clock in the morning on December 31, 1972. I found a bottle of cognac, which my parents had bought specially for the New Year’s celebration, and I gulped down two full large glasses, one after another. Mother woke up. She immediately understood what had happened but didn’t say a word.

I took all my money, the entire seven hundred rubles, my first substantial payment. This money was supposed to show her that I was a man capable of providing for a family, helping her, being a true support for a talented woman. This money was supposed to prove that I had succeeded in becoming a professional producer, and that from now on I intended to be the captain of our ship, while she would do rehearsals with me and listen to what I said. I took all this money and went to spend it on booze.

I drank all through my winter vacation and spent everything I had. I threw my wedding ring into the farthest corner of the Europa Hotel, and it rolled away, jingling lightly, across the parquet oak floor.

It’s hard to believe, but many years later this ring returned to me. By that time I had already become a jeweler and took orders from clients at my home. Once, a woman who came to me to place an order, handed me a gold ring as raw material for the item she wanted to have. Before I even took it into my hands and examined it, or peered at the inside of the ring where I would find the inscription: “Valya 1968”, I already positively knew that it was my ring, though its appearance did not differ in any way from thousands of others like it.

I looked at the engraving and saw that I was right. The lady customer left, and I sat there for a long time, thinking what I should do. Of course, I could use my own ring for the client’s order and leave this one for myself.

Then I recalled our entire life together, how she had left me, her New Year’s letter, my drinking, my pain, my jealousy and my love.

And I smelted the ring. It became nothing but a small drop of metal.



So I spent all the seven hundred rubles I earned on drinks, consumed the marigold tincture from my parents' medicine box, and walked along the fourth floor cornice of our building to my mother's locked room to get the two small bottles of vodka, which I knew she kept there. I drank both bottles there and then, and came back into my room along the same precarious route. No matter how awful, this drinking spree saved me. Otherwise I might have gone after her – I knew where she was – and killed her.

Ten days later my own body told me it could stand no more of this. I came to my senses on a sofa at the apartment on Liteiny Avenue, and began to slowly get my life back. In another few days, when I was already feeling a little better, I flew back to Saransk to stage a new play in the theater there.

But two days after that I fainted for no apparent reason at my hotel room in the middle of the night. I had an unbearable pain in my stomach. This is how I found myself on a hospital operating table.

... I was coming to after the anesthetic. I was already aware that I had had surgery, I could already hear people talking around me and could understand what was going on. I heard the surgeons saying: "After four hours of surgery we can finally get out for a smoke." Then they went out. Two nurses who stayed with me in the operating room were whispering something to each other about their personal lives.

I lay there limply and felt as if I was made of cotton wool. Then I suddenly felt my limp tongue falling into my throat and closing it up like a bathtub plug. I lay there and couldn't breathe. There was nothing I could do about it. I couldn't speak, couldn't call anyone, and couldn't even wave my hand. And all the while the nurses continued their whispering conversation.

Then I remembered a joke. Honest to goodness, I didn't think about my family, about Valya, I didn't think about anything noble and eternal. I just remembered a joke on the same subject.

...It happened in a provincial hospital. Everyone was getting ready to operate on a very important local communist party boss. The operating room was filled with various instruments and devices – an artificial heart, an artificial kidney; tubes were stretched across the room; indicators were vibrating slightly on the sophisticated equipment. A famous professor, a medical genius, was summoned from Moscow.

The professor walks into the operating room and comes up to the sick man. The man begins to wheeze and choke. Assistants check the equipment over and over again. Everything is in order. Oxygen flows freely, the blood transfusion is going as it should.

But each time the professor approaches his bedside, the sick man starts wheezing. Finally the professor gives orders: “Give him a pencil and a piece of paper, perhaps he will write down what bothers him.”

The sick man scribbled something on the piece of paper. The professor came up and took the paper from his hands, and as he started reading the sick man breathed his last.

“His handwriting is hard to read,” said the elderly professor. His assistant took the piece of paper and read in a loud voice:

“You’re standing on the tube, you stupid bastard.”

I too was about to die with this joke on my lips.

They later told me that the surgeons came back to the operating room after they were through smoking. It was my lucky star.

“Look,” one of them said. “ Our guy has turned blue!”

It was no wonder I turned blue. She was standing on the tube, the stupid bitch.

The phone was ringing without stop in my empty hotel room. My dad finally had an inkling to call the floor help.

“Ananov? From room fourteen? Didn’t you know he died!? Are you a relative or what?”

Dad didn’t say a word to anyone in the house and flew out to Saransk immediately. He told me later that during the entire trip he was convinced that it was some kind of mistake. Just as what happened in the field hospital during the war, when my mother was told the same thing:

“Sergeant Ananov? Didn’t you know he died!?”

My mother found dad in the morgue, among the dead, but his body was still warm. And she nursed him back to life. She too was convinced then that it was some kind of mistake.

Several days after the surgery I couldn’t resist sending Valya a telegram. I wrote her that I experienced clinical death and had major surgery, and I asked her to visit me. But she did not fly to Saransk. Instead, she sent this telegram: “Don’t waste your time. I don’t believe a word of this melodrama.”

After that I never wrote to her about anything.



...I was married again. My wife was a lovely, beautiful, pure young woman who loved me. She had a romantic name, Stella. It was then that Valya reappeared on the horizon.

She phoned me and said that she was pregnant, and that she was living in Riga, working at the theater there. She told me that she came to Leningrad to have her baby here, and that she is at the Snegiryovka hospital and needed butter, sugar, tea and some cash. She added that her new husband was drinking heavily back in Riga and did not seem to be in a hurry to join her.

I recalled the beginning of our life together. Three weeks after our first night, Valya went to have an abortion, and I gave her five rubles and brought her sugar, tea and butter.

Now, many years later, I was once again bringing her butter, sugar, tea and cash.

Later, I went to get her and her son Maxim from the maternity clinic. As was the custom, I put three rubles in the pocket of the nurses' assistant.

"Congratulations to the lucky father on the birth of his son," said the woman.

...Years went by. Valya would call me once in a while asking for money. I sent it to her. She called again once and asked me to come. A terrible thing happened to her husband. A young and healthy man, he lost his speech after a brain injury – nothing worse could have happened to a professional actor. He became totally disabled, and Valya was desperate.

I drove to Riga by car, took Valya's husband with me to Leningrad. For ten days the three of us – Stella, Valya's husband and myself – lived in one room in an apartment, which we shared with other neighbors. During these ten days I taught him the basics of the art of jewelry making. Fortunately, he was good with his hands and quickly learned the more simple skills.

Some time after that I visited Valya in Riga. My protégé was progressing in his work and had already started making a little money. Their son was quite a big lad already.

Valya came to St. Petersburg the last time in the early nineteen nineties. She went there to die: she had been diagnosed with lung cancer. She spent two months in a hospital, and, as before, I brought her sugar, butter, medicine and cash.

"Andrei, if they release me, please take me to Vyborg, where I was born. I would like to die there," she asked me once.

She was soon released from hospital.

I took her to Vyborg.

## BUNNY RABBIT

I developed a drinking habit when I found myself in the fleet at the age of fifteen.

In those years, under Krushchev, the Soviet secondary school system was undergoing a reorganization. So when I finished eighth grade, I discovered that I would have to spend not two but three more years at school before I could graduate. Many of my peers left and enrolled at evening schools, which were then called “schools for the working youth”, where the ten-year program remained unchanged. Some of them actually worked during the day, others somehow got fictitious certificates about their employment.

Once again, I decided to do my own thing. My plan was to learn the entire remaining school curriculum in one year on my own, with the help of my dad, who was a math professor, take the necessary final exams and enroll at the university, all in accordance with the established family tradition of academic excellence. But father fell seriously ill, and was placed for a long time at the neurosis clinic on Vasilievsky Island. So I was left to my devices, without guidance and instruction. Mother was busy at work and my little brother Nikita and I spent most of the time in the company of our housekeeper Faina, a kind, simple village woman, who lived with our family for about twenty years.

I couldn't study on my own and as the result I wasted a couple of months without anything to do and then found myself in Tallinn, wearing my dad's then fashionable sharp-nosed boots, without any money or connections.

At that time my passion was playing billiards. I started by playing with metal billiard balls at an undersized table on the playground at the Tavrichesky Garden, and turned out to be a rather fast learner. Then I went “into training” with Nikolai Pavlovich Chizhov at the Leningrad Officers' Club. He was a great expert and previously the king of the city's billiard rooms. In those years Nikolai Pavlovich was working as a marker at the club. I would skip school and go to the Officers' Club in the morning, which wasn't difficult considering that it was two buildings away from where I lived. The person at the check-in table thought that I was taking ballroom dancing classes. But I found a key that fitted one of the inside doors and entered the other side of the building. Without anyone noticing me, I then went to the billiards room. I can't tell why Nikolai Pavlovich decided to be my mentor. It could be because he was a lonely man or because he wanted to pass on to someone else his unique technique and the secrets of the game. I pretended to be older than my real age and lied about going to college. I earned the nicknames of “student” and also “champion of the House of Pioneers”. I actually played quite well. Nikolai Pavlovich instructed me, and sometimes in the morning I acted as a partner for some officer with money. We played for money, and I after some time I began to win. I gave all the cash I had won to my teacher, and he gave me part of it back as “an allowance”. If I lost it was also his responsibility to pay the winner.

As I said I found myself in Tallinn. For a while I did my “act” at the billiards room of the local Officers' Club, winning modest amounts and eating nothing but ice cream. It turned

out to be a highly nutritious product. I also roamed around the suburbs, looking for adventure. I once won while playing with a navigating officer, who didn't have enough money on him to pay me. This is how I found myself at the seaport, on the "Vega" training vessel – a three-masted sailing boat, where we partied to celebrate our acquaintance and where I stayed for the night. Afterwards I stayed there as a trainee under the guidance of the deck sailor, in other words as a ship's boy. Aboard this romantic sailboat students of the Tallinn marine school had their two-month long training classes.

My adventure seeking nature attracted me towards "adult life". When I received my first leave warrant I went to dance at the "Merry-club", proudly donning somebody else's cap with the "crab" and "borrowing" a silver ring, which belonged to an Estonian sailor from the crew's quarters. When I returned to the yacht, I was attacked and beaten by the owner of the ring. The owner of the cap, who was also Estonian, also participated in the fight. And though it then seemed to me that I was punished unfairly, I remembered this lesson for the rest of my life. True enough, this episode didn't add to my affection for Estonians.

When I was little, I was terribly afraid of heights. On the sailing ship I learned that only sailors were allowed to work on the upper main topgallant yards. Students were only permitted to work on the lower main yard. Still, I understood early on that I would soon be put to shame and that my moment of disgrace was around the corner. Whenever I heard a scraping and cracking sound coming from the ship's loudspeaker, which meant that another command for the crew was forthcoming, I tensed up inside. I held my breath every time in anticipation of the following announcement:

"Practice sail alarm. The crew is to take up their respective positions on the upper and lower main yard..."

The upper main topgallant yards – they were located at the very top of the mainmast, at a height of almost seventy feet above the deck.

But so far the Lord was merciful to me. The loudspeaker was silent.

Once, at night, I mustered all my courage. The crew and the students were fast asleep. There was only one sailor on night duty by the steering wheel on the captain's bridge. It was a pitch-dark night, with no stars. A strong side wind was blowing. The ship was being run by motor.

The sailor on duty looked ahead of him, sometimes lightly touching the steering wheel. He never turned back. There was no one else on the deck. Only the wind whistled in the rigging and the mizzen staysail in front of me made a squeaking sound, its top disappearing into the black void.

I dashed towards the rope ladder in desperation and started climbing, without looking up, down or to the sides of me.

I reached the first stay rather fast and found myself on the rigging surrounding the mast. I couldn't see the next portion of the rope ladder with its wooden plank steps hidden behind the mast.

I grabbed hold of the standing rigging and crawled on my belly towards its opposite side. I crawled higher up in despair. I won't even try to describe how I reached the upper main yard. I clutched at the lift with all my might and swayed back and forth together with the mast. At that moment I realized with some regret that the students were right when, with the look of experienced seafarers, they told me that in stormy weather the amplitude of the tip of the mainmast could exceed twenty feet.

I will refrain from describing how I climbed down, grabbing onto anything I could lay my hands on, as if I were a crab with claws and a tail. It seemed to me that I was crawling, moving slowly, inch-by-inch, spreading out like warm manure. At long last, shivering from the cold and from fear, I reached the safety of the crew's quarters, which was warm and felt like home. I pulled the blanket over my head and fell asleep like a log. I climbed to the upper main yard again the next night – and I did it over and over again every night, feeling more and more confident, until finally, on a windless night I already felt so sure of myself that I was even able to walk, moving my legs along the lift like a real sailor, all along the upper yard and to its very end.

I spent six months aboard the Vega and, passing a professional exam, turned from a novice into a seasoned sailor of the second rank. I learned to row very well, could easily unwind the upper yard sail during a sail alarm while I stood on the lift and lay with my stomach on the rigging. I even dived from the foreyard during a water show, which is both difficult to do and quite dangerous, because instead of diving into the water one could easily dive head first into the deck. In other words, I became a man.

But I also started drinking.



To this day I cannot understand what miracle allowed me to survive and not end my life at the bottom of this pit that destroyed many others. I don't know why I didn't drink myself to the state of delirium tremens or get killed in a drunken brawl, or tie a rope to the hook from which the chandelier was hanging in our apartment on Liteiny Avenue. That wouldn't have been hard considering the height of the ceilings there. By some miracle I survived the awful alcoholic depressions, when I wanted only one thing – to forget myself in sleep and never wake up. When I look back, I am unable to understand how I could get enrolled at the university, graduate from the Theater Institute, become the producer of forty four plays, a well-known sportsman, film actor and, in general, how I could live.

So who saved me, protected me from misfortune and even tragic death, who led me out into the light of day, who helped me get on my feet? Was it God, my guardian angel, my



destiny, people who were close to me and loved me, or something else, which lived inside of me and didn't allow me to give up, to acknowledge my own helplessness, my mediocrity?

"Life never forgets to close one door before it opens another," my dad said to me. He committed suicide, and one door closed to me with his death. I buried him, and in his memory I gave up drinking. This opened another door for me.

I was completely abstinent for five years. I caught up with things I never got a chance to do. I did the main thing I could do at that time – I found my place in life and answered the most important questions. I understood the meaning of my life, what and who I wanted to be. I used the chance opportunity, which led me to the profession of jeweler. I made my mother a pin with a pearl, my first work with gold, in place of the one I sold years before in exchange for vodka. Mother died, and this pin has always been with me since her death. I wear it in my tie. And nobody knows what I think of and recall when I look at it. This is a sad story, and nobody needs to know about it.

People rarely feel sorry for those who have a drinking problem. They usually detest them, or put up with them with disdain, or, even more frequently, betray them and leave them. None of the people dear to me, who do not drink, will ever learn what terrible suffering a drunkard experiences when he sobers up in a serious depression. The tortures are far worse than any physical suffering. I experienced a nightmare worse than this one only once in my life, when I was on the brink of death the second time, lying in a Tallinn hospital, tormented by an excruciating pain in my intestines, which became inflamed after being pierced with a knife. I was dying from the most advanced stage of peritonitis. But God rescued me then.

But then God sent me my ultimate salvation, my guardian angel, my little daughter Anya, probably the only person who truly loves me. Anya or Bunny Rabbit, as I call her endearingly, diverted trouble from me and saved me, without being aware of it, not even trying, so it seemed, without tears, without raising her voice, without reproaches and preaching what is right. Anyway, what kind of preaching can one hear from a child who is not even one year old, who can't even talk properly yet! But she succeeded in saving me, and I will tell her about it.

Bunny Rabbit was supposed to be born in August, and then we would have had two Leos in the family –Leo-father and Leo-daughter. But she was born three weeks prematurely, so Anya is a Cancer, not a Leo. Actually a sweet little Cancer with the makings of a Leo.

...The driver dropped me off at the country house like a sack of flower. Without looking up at my wife and daughter, hunching my shoulders with shame and disgrace, I walked unsteadily to my room and got into bed, pulling the blanket over my head. It was a warm summer day but I was shivering as if from a fever. My blanket shifted suddenly to the side. It was Bunny Rabbit who walked soundlessly into the room and lay down next to me. In all honesty, I was horrified when I saw an adult pain and grief in her eyes of a

young child. We lay silently side-by-side for a while. Then I felt a soft little hand stroking me hesitantly.

I pressed my forehead to her thin little back and broke into soundless tears. I cried with gratitude to this tiny creature who found the one and only thing that could help me and which I did not expect to get from anyone. I cuddled myself to her and lay there without moving, afraid that she might leave. She was usually such a fidget. But she did not go away and continued to stroke me quietly. Anya was less than a year old at the time.

No one had ever before pitied me like that – quietly, with love and patience, without screaming or starting a fight. Maybe it was because few people have this ability to feel another person's pain, or have the subtleness to hear these silent calls for help, invisible to the eye, and respond to them with compassion, sharing in exchange their love and affection.

Bunny Rabbit felt my pain; she loved me and was sorry for me. And this lifted my spirits because I realized that I have someone to live for, that I am not alone in this world inhabited by strangers and filled with indifference. I am not alone in this world that suffers from lack of sensitive and perceptive kinship, capable of heeding to signals of another person's pain, people with loving and generous hearts.

For a long time afterwards, whenever I saw a tumbler with alcohol, I would remember the adult pain in my daughter's eyes. And it helped me fight the habit. It helped me control myself, fight the temptation of taking the tumbler in my hand, and avoid another drinking spree. I refrained from drinking for almost half a year. But then I gradually began to forget the tiny warm hand stroking me at the country house, and I resumed my drinking. Three days of a non-stop binge, then two days of depression, with thoughts of hanging myself while I was lying flat on the sofa, a cup of hot chicken soup on the third day, two more days until complete recovery and return to normal life, and finally, several weeks of intense productive work. Then the cycle was repeated all over again.

I tried to get cured a number of times in my life. After my dad's death, in his memory, I had the same "espiral" ampoule implanted in my body, from which the famous actor and singer Vladimir Vysotsky had died years ago, and I stopped drinking for five years. Then another ampoule, followed by a year and a half or two years of abstinence, and more drinking. And finally, Bunny Rabbit entered my life.

That winter Bunny Rabbit's mom left for a few days to visit her grandmother in Smolensk. My daughter and I stayed home, just the two of us. I enjoyed taking her out for some fresh air, feeding her, changing her and putting her to bed. She was still sleeping in a crib with high side netting for safety.

One evening a neighbor dropped by. I put my baby daughter to bed, and we sat down for a drink. Some of the details of that night are gone from my memory: what I remember clearly is that I started the last bottle of vodka when my friend had already left.

...I came to my senses in the middle of the night. A bright moon was shining through the undraped window, shedding its pale light on the objects in the room. There were enormous shadows on the walls and the floor. I was lying on top of the blanket, with my clothes and my shoes on, and I was so thirsty that the air couldn't get through to my lungs.

I suddenly became aware of a warm body near me. Right next to me, standing on her knees, leaning forwards, with her head lying on my sofa, was Bunny Rabbit. She was fast asleep and soaking wet. Her bare legs seemed particularly white against the dark floor.

I stopped breathing I was so horrified. In my mind's eye I immediately saw the following picture. Bunny Rabbit woke up in the middle of the night. She cried and called me. But I was dead drunk and snoring in the adjacent room. Bunny Rabbit succeeded somehow to climb over the high netting, and she didn't fall down in the dark or break her tiny legs, but maybe she did fall and hurt herself, and maybe she called me again and cried with pain, but then she gave up and crawled around the large apartment, trying to find me in the eerie silence. Bunny Rabbit finally found where I was and stayed with me the whole night like my guardian angel, standing on her knees by her hopelessly lost father. She was ready to give me all that she, a year and a half old child, had – her fragile unprotected soul, her love, which was expressed in things other than words. She was ready to rescue me, like my guardian angel, from my misfortune.

I forced myself to get up, changed my daughter without waking her, put her back to bed and covered her with my blanket. Then I poured the remaining vodka into the toilet bowl, got undressed and lay down next to her, covering my head under the blanket and pressing my forehead to my little daughter's slender back. All my sufferings were suddenly gone, and I fell asleep, quietly and calmly.

Many years had gone by. I haven't had a drop of alcohol since that day. I hope that this malaise was at long last gone.

Bunny Rabbit is now attending school in Paris, and she already reads and speaks fluently in French. She frequently catches a cold, and she hates hot milk with honey. Bunny Rabbit lives in Paris with her mother and her little sister Nastya.

They are good friends and love to play together. Bunny Rabbit loves me as she did before, and she always waits for my visits. "I took my brains from my dad and my good looks from my mom," she often says. Bunny Rabbit is growing fast.

Let the Lord give my daughter good health and happiness.

## THE EXPEDITION

Summer was near. This was the most difficult time of the year for my parents: they had to decide what they were going to do with me, a seventeen-year-old bum. The problem was that they wanted to go and spent time at our country house and I didn't. On the other hand, they were not at all eager to leave me alone in the city, in our classy old apartment, which would have instantly become packed with my friends, with girls, alcohol, shrieking and laughter, songs sung to the guitar, card games and other cool activities. Therefore, they had to find something for me to do for the summer.

So mother thought of something. She knew my adventurous streak and my love for all kinds of exciting ventures, and she helped me get a job as a worker for a geological expedition, which was going to some God-forsaken place somewhere between the South Urals and North Kazakhstan for the summer. It was a university expedition, and it consisted of students specializing in geography and paleontology postgraduates, while mother's colleague with the odd last name of Donner was head of the expedition.

My parents were the first to leave, going to the country, and they left me alone in the city for a couple of days. My friends of course organized a noisy farewell party for me, so that the neighbors even called the police to restore order, but everything ended well. Just in case, we locked the girls up in the pantry and hung a large lock on the outside, telling them to be quiet. The cops left, without finding any signs of unlawful activity, and they didn't even ruin our moods. All this ended with a pile of dirty dishes in the kitchen, a large number of empty and unfinished wine bottles and a lovely girl, who spent the night with me and about whom I don't remember anything -- neither her name, nor her appearance -- except for the fact that I had a wonderful time with her and that the following day she saw me off at the railway station.

The expedition was divided into a number of individual teams, about ten-twelve people in each, and we were to have separate assignments from the rest. Our team also left separately, without the others, from the Moscow Train Station, which was our assigned meeting place.

The scary "cocktail" made of port, vodka, cognac and dry wine -- all that remained from my start-up money which I spent entirely on booze -- was making bubbly sounds in the polyester flask in my knapsack. The "cocktail" consisted of all the "leftovers" from the bottles unfinished the night before. I was wearing a canvas-hooded anorak, and it appeared that everyone else on the team was dressed the same way. They were all undergraduate and postgraduate students -- young, tall, handsome and strong.

"These are cosmonauts going someplace," an older woman said respectfully as we were passing by.

The train started, and all the team members assembled together in a single compartment, at least eight people packed in it like sardines. Andrei Grachev, our boss, and the only young woman in the team, a postgraduate student by the name of , who, as we later found out, was his girlfriend, joined us later, when we got to our destination. Everyone in the team introduced themselves. Trying to keep an independent front, I took out my flask after a little while and passed it around. None of them were into drinking, judged by the fact that they didn't take any booze with them, but no one could refuse a free drink! I didn't let in what kind of a cocktail I had in the flask, and they started guessing. Some of them even suggested it was something like gin, but none of them were able to guess right. I don't remember anything else about this trip, except for the fact that someone asked me if I played pool, and I said I did. I actually played very poorly, because I had only received a few lessons prior to that from my aunt, my mother's sister Aunt Katya, a bizarre woman, who smoked the cheapest cigarettes and was remarkably good at cards. She died very young, probably before she turned fifty, from cancer.

So I took the place of the fourth in the company of pool-players, and throughout the summer I regularly gave them my "field money" – twenty-five rubles, which we received once a month. For you to have some idea about how much it was, the price of a bottle of port in those days was a ruble and thirty-seven kopecks, while a pack of Pamir cigarettes cost eleven kopecks. I was a chain smoker in those days.

The long trip took several days; we had to make a few transfers before we finally got to the very end of the Kuibyshev railway line, to the place where the railroad embankment simply ended abruptly, running against three steel rails, sticking out of the ground. Then we drove across the steppe in the back of a truck for another full day, with practically no road to speak of, and towards evening we stopped for the night in a village with five or six houses, which surrounded a small mine with a huge mountain of refuse ore, called "a rock dump". What was excavated there I have not the slightest clue, particularly since we only spent a night and part of the morning in that house near the mine. To be more precise, the rest of the team spent a night and part of the morning in that house, throwing their sleeping bags right onto the earthen floor. As for me, I didn't really have a chance to get any sleep and you'll now find out why.

There were other rock dumps similar to the one next to our house and I could see them rise above the steppe, separated by a distance of maybe a mile or two. The truck driver told us that there was a club with a dance floor near one of the other rock dumps. It was Saturday, and therefore that night there would be dancing. I had originally managed to convince several of my colleagues to join me and get acquainted with the local female population. One of the purposes was the need to hire a cook for our team. Grachev, our boss, had told us that we would need to find one, when we were still in Leningrad. But my friends felt dizzy from the sun and were, in general, exhausted by the long journey, and they just dropped off to sleep. So I went to the dance club alone. Fortunately for me, the driver who brought us to the village was going past the club on his return trip.

The trip in the truck seemed very short to me. I did not manage to impress anyone particularly on the dance floor, and consequently the local elite did not beat me up afterwards. And so, without having anyone to take me home after the dance were over, I went on foot back to the village.

The only existing road brought me to the edge of another small village. I was now accompanied by a great number of stray dogs, which barked incessantly but did not bite. As soon as the village ended, so did the lamps on the lampposts along the road.

It was a pitch-black night, with no moon or stars in the sky. I thought I was moving in the right direction. Sometimes I bent over and felt the road with my hands. Once I was reassured that there were ruts from the passing trucks under my feet, I continued on my way.

After passing a deep ravine, which did not seem to be there the time before, I got to the top of a small hill an hour later, and I saw a lamppost with a lamp blinking in the distance. I remembered seeing a similar lamppost next to our house, so I went towards that barely visible source of light.

It was already dawn when I reached the lamppost. Indeed, there was a house next to it. Only it wasn't the house I was looking for. There was light in one of the windows. I assumed that the inhabitants of the house were already up. I knocked. A man in a heavy quilted jacket opened the door. When he understood where I was going he waved his hand:

"It's over there."

"How far is it?"

"Not far, no more than four miles away."

I slept till morning on a mattress thrown right on the ground, and then I thumbed a lift to the village, where the others were spending the night.

Our team was dislocated on the bank of the Kumak River. We put up the tents. One large tent was called the staff headquarters, where the postgraduate students analyzed and systematized the collected materials in rainy weather. Each of us, and we were eight young men, got a separate tent for two. There were no beds, just our sleeping bags, and our knapsacks acted as pillows. We were about forty-five feet away from the river, but to get there we had to go down a narrow path leading along the steep rocky embankment. The sides of the small, winding river were overgrown with reeds. The river abounded in pike and water turtles, while its opposite bank – flat, unlike ours – served as our vegetable garden. It wasn't exactly clear who the cabbage, potatoes and carrots that grew there belonged to, but I must admit it was a beneficial addition to our modest menu, which consisted of canned food we brought along with us and bread. The bread was delivered once a week from the nearest village, about forty miles away, by the GAS-63

model truck assigned to our team. We actually also had our own driver, but this didn't prevent anyone who knew and didn't know how to drive from getting behind the wheel. Anyway, the sun-bleached steppe was like one wide road, and nobody in these parts ever heard about rules of the road or traffic cops.

The issue of the cook was resolved without much difficulty. Upon his arrival the boss found out that we had no cook and he asked: "Who is the youngest here?" This is how I became a cook. Nobody even thought to ask me if I knew anything about cooking.

In the morning, after breakfast, the driver took the guys on their route, to the location where they dropped off work the day before. I stayed behind in the camp. There basically was no reason to complain: I went finishing, crossed the river on a self-made raft to fetch some vegetables, prepared dinner and washed the aluminum plates. I devised a fantastic method for washing the dishes. I would lower them in a net bag into the river, and half an hour later they would be spic and span, polished clean by the tiny fish, which scurried back and forth in great numbers and ate any food that remained on the plates.

I never intended to become a chef, but ever since I was a kid I had one distinct quality. Despite my generally unruly character I loved to learn new things and easily retained different, and what sometimes seemed unnecessary information. My mother was a very good cook, and I would occasionally watch her when she was busy in the kitchen. That's how I learned some of her secrets. This knowledge came in handy now, and what I didn't know was compensated for by necessity and my practical mind. I prepared delicious fish soup on the fire from the fish I had just caught myself: I made fried cabbage on a flat griddle, which we stole from some diner; I baked potatoes in the hot sand. In other words, I hustled and bustled the whole day trying to prepare a good meal for the guys, while they came back towards evening, so hungry that they wolfed everything down in no time, and went to sleep.

Sometimes all the different teams got together in one place during the weekends. We would make camp by the river and set fire to old automobile tires, which we found in the steppe and specially saved for the occasion. When they burned, the tires gave off a lot of smoke and sparks flew high up into the black sky. We had a picnic with a modest amount of alcohol, and then we sat at the fire for a long time singing to the sounds of the guitar. Towards morning everyone went back to his or her own camps. These nights in the steppe left me with a feeling of wholesomeness and romanticism, a memory of stinging smoke from the burning rubber and a light sadness that my youth was already gone.

Much of what happened during this wonderful time has been erased from my memory, but there are several episodes that have stayed with me for the rest of my life, and I think they are worth telling.

## **TURTLE SOUP**

There were freshwater turtles living in our river, extremely cautious animals. On hot days they would sit up to their necks in the water and, sticking their tiny heads out of the

water, they would nibble at the grass growing along the riverbank. They dived into the water at the slightest sign of danger and did not allow anybody to come closer than thirty-five feet.

I dreamed of making a turtle ashtray and bringing it back home with me as a trophy. We had a small-caliber rifle, which belonged to the boss, and on one occasion I managed to convince him to leave it with me. When all the other guys left on their route of the day, I started my hunt.

I wasted at least half a package of bullets, until I finally hit the turtle's tiny head from a distance of forty-fifty feet away. Now I had the arduous task of clearing out the shell. Without much ado, I decided to cook the turtle, understanding that this would be the best way to get out the meat. I hung a pail of water above the fire and placed the dead turtle inside.

Several hours later half the water had evaporated, and I took the turtle out. As I had anticipated the meat could now be easily separated from the shell. But, to my great surprise, I discovered that the liquid in the pail looked very much like chicken broth. I salted and tasted it. True enough, the broth was undistinguishable from chicken broth, and I decided to prepare a true delicatessen for my friends. I added some carrots, cabbage and potatoes and made wonderful, tasty cabbage soup.

When my geologist friends came back in the evening, they were quite pleased with my cooking and asked for second helpings of my soup. We continued eating our dinner peacefully until one of them, a huge Ukrainian guy by the name of Lyosha Kolesnichenko, said, drawing out the words: "I don't seem to recall chickens having organs such as these," and he took a turtle paw with yellow claws out of his soup.

I could tell from the tense silent that they were going to beat me up. And my intuition didn't mislead me. I was saved by the fact that I was a good runner. I had to run for a long time, since all eight of them were trying to catch me. But while they were running after me, their anger evaporated, and they laughed their heads off, making fun of Lyosha, who kept looking for turtle paws in every kind of food after this episode, whether it was cereal or stewed fruit.

## **DOWNPOUR**

It started pouring since evening, and to say that it was raining cats and dogs would be to say nothing. Torrential streams of water kept falling from the sky. Water gushed noisily around the tent and rolled down into the river. The saddleback canvas roof caved in under the weight of the water, and, God forbid that I should touch the roof from the inside with so much as a finger – a trickle of water would instantly start pouring into the tent.



It stopped raining by morning, and we began to get ready for our daily route. By that time I was no longer working as a cook, since we finally found a plump young local girl to do the cooking for the team. So I joined the others in their daily routine.

After breakfast I climbed into my tent to get my knapsack, which I used as a pillow at night. I lifted the knapsack and froze....

Under it, curled up into a circle was a huge viper. There were actually a lot of snakes in these parts, and we had all got accustomed to them. Snakes crawled peacefully across the steppe, and they showed a particular liking for the riverbank, for the spot where we had our campsite. Almost every morning, when we went down to the water, we would walk into a viper crawling across the path. But they never attacked us, and we, too, left them alone. However to sleep in the same tent with a viper, and such a big one at that, was quite another story. I never experienced anything like it before.

Shivering with horror, I imagined the following scene: in my sleep I put my hand underneath the knapsack, as if it were a pillow (which I liked doing when I was little and still do). I put my hand around the viper, unaware of the cold slippery body of the snake with its black zigzag along its back. Why it didn't bite me, I still can't understand. The snake must have crawled under the side of the tent during the night, trying to get away from the rain, and it made itself comfortable, finding the driest and warmest spot. Perhaps, it was out of gratitude for my hospitality that it didn't bite me.

Quickly moving backwards, I rushed out of the tent. A little later, feeling more composed, I began to pull out my knapsack carefully with the tip of fishing gear. But the snake under it was already gone.

## **CORRIDA**

Our truck turned around, signaled to us in parting and drove away, leaving the two of us in the middle of the steppe, bleached white by the sun and even, like the surface of a table. It was unbearably hot, probably over 100° F, and there was no place to hide from the sun. There was not a single shrub or tree anywhere around, nothing but dry, cracked clay.

We, that is the geo-morphologist Valentina, a pretty young postgraduate student, and myself, were dropped off at "the spot", the last location at which work was finished on the previous day's route. We were engaged in the so-called geo-morphological surveying of the location. It consisted in the boring and monotonous task of moving along a straight line in a given direction. Each day we were supposed to cover twelve-fifteen miles. Every twelve hundred feet we would stick a shovel in the ground and take a survey of the soil weighing approximately one pound, packing it separately with a notation of the route number and exact place of surveying. In other words, every three quarters of a mile I added approximately two and a half pounds of earth to the weight of my knapsack. I was allowed to leave the knapsack in the middle of the steppe only after covering eight miles, so that the driver could pick it up while he was making the rounds of the different routes.

This is what my romantic work really consisted of – digging the ground and carrying it from one to place to another.

The sun was scorching. A large thistle, which looked like a prickly dry soccer ball, was rolling past us carried away by the wind. Large grasshoppers jumped out from under our feet and, once in a while, vipers crawled by unhurriedly. We could see a herd from a neighboring collective farm moving away slowly in the distance.

We put our knapsacks on the ground and proceeded to hang Valentina's dress between the indicator, a three feet long stake that had been driven into the ground the day before, and the vertically standing shovel, thus creating a bit of shade. We then sat back to back on the ground, and, feeling drowsy from the heat, we immediately dozed off.

I was awakened by a terrible roaring. An enormous pedigree bull was bellowing some thirty feet away from us. Digging the ground with his hooves furiously, his head with its large horns lowered, the bull was advancing slowly upon us. Yellow saliva was oozing out of his wide-open mouth. Valentina woke up, too, and gasped with horror. For a few seconds we both sat there immobile with fear at this unexpected ordeal.

"Let's run," Valentina said in a weak voice.

"Where to?" I responded, and yet we both rose to our feet cautiously, trying not to make any abrupt movements.

"I'm going to kill him now," I said quietly and pulled the shovel out of the ground. In this frightening and ridiculous situation I still tried to act like a man.

"Don't do that. It's probably worth a lot of money," Valentina objected gravely.

Our knees buckled in as we began to move away, slowly and cautiously, leaving all our belongings behind. The bull followed us, keeping his distance and roaring.

"Listen, I'm wearing a red swimsuit and you have striped trunks."

We took off these unnecessary articles and threw them on the ground. The only attire we now had was the shovel.

The sluggish escape of the two geologists didn't end with that. It now seems to me that it continued for no less than an hour. From the side it must have been an impressive sight: a beautiful naked woman, a naked young man with a shovel and an enormous bull with huge horns. We moved slowly along the perimeter of a large circle, trying not to veer too far away from our drop-off place. The bull finally got close enough to our knapsacks to sense the smell of bread and sugar, so he chewed up our knapsacks with all that was inside. He left us a few rags with saliva-covered holes. Then he proceeded to chew up Valentina's red bathing suite, for some reason showing no interest in my striped trunks. After that he looked back in the direction of the herd, which had gotten even further

away, stood still for a while, turned his huge body around slowly and brusquely walked away. We stood without moving for a while longer.

“Turn away,” said Valentina.

There were no cows, or snakes, or people around, nobody at all. There was only the steppe, the sun, a slender young woman and a seventeen-year-old man.

## **DO NOT LEAVE ME, O LORD**

A shard of wood floats along a winding river, pushed forward by the current, propelled forward by the wind, turning around in whirlpools and getting stuck in shallow waters. It floats along, now getting closer to one riverbank, now to the other, sometimes joining some floating light garbage or a bunch of dry leaves and grass which hangs low above the water. At times it is hindered in its path and cannot get out of the entanglement of trees and bushes flooded the year before, but then it sets itself free and floats on, forced onwards by the current.

A thousand different things can have an impact on the movement of an uncontrolled particle of matter, which is being kept on the surface by Archimedes principle and is being flung into the water by a certain chain of circumstances at the will of Mother Nature.

Now the even surface of the river is disrupted by a single splash – a little boy flung a flat pebble into the water. The pebble bounced off the surface several times and then sank slowly to the bottom. But in its short path it created some waves and agitated the smooth surface of the river. This small incident threw the shard of wood off its designated route in the jumble of river sludge, which stretched out its greedy blue-green fingers towards it. A sudden gust of wind carried the shard of wood to the side, so that the grasping weedy fingers were unable to reach it, and it floated on, downstream, in the direction of the Ocean, because all rivers on earth eventually flow into the Ocean. And if the shard of wood manages to reach the place where fresh water gets mixed up with salty water, the shard of wood will disappear from sight, only to find itself in a totally new, unfamiliar environment. It will be raised high into the sky by the enormous waves breaking against rocky cliffs, and finding itself in a new world, a world with ebbing and flowing, with intertwined oceanic currents, strange-looking fish and vast expanses of water disappearing beyond the horizon, the shard of wood will accept the end of its old river existence and the beginning of a new life in the ocean filled with the unexpected.

All of this is given to us from above.

The chain of circumstances, which fling us into the river of our Destiny, and our floating along its winding course on a wooden shard or a dry autumn leaf, on an empty matchbox or a log of wood, maybe even on a boat, launch or ship – all this is predetermined.

It is not in our power to change the peculiar curves in the river, or the grass and trees along its banks, nor can we change the direction of the current, or stop the blowing of the wind and the rising of the waves.

But there are some things that we can influence as we float along this predestined route in our river. Yes, it is true that, whatever we do, the current carries us unavoidably to the place where the wide mouth of the river meets the Ocean, but at every moment of its existence the river is the expanse of water between its banks -- it covers a certain distance between them. So in some places the river is narrower; it has a faster current and the waves roll over rapids and waterfalls, while in other places it widens immensely, and the calm current allows us to move easily, getting now slightly closer to one bank, now to the other. We sometimes find ourselves surrounded by the rapids, or stuck in the backwaters, only to turn wildly in a whirlpool soon after, or float ahead with the current. This movement alone is the essence of our life and our struggle with the elements. The time span, in which we can realize our potential, our gifts and talents given to us by Nature, has been determined from above.

True enough, we are unable to control the flow of the current, or move the riverbanks closer or further apart, nor can we stop the wave or even the little boy intent on throwing the pebble into the water. But if we look far ahead into the distance and direct our movement, we may be able to avoid the traps set by large boulders, dangerous sandbanks and whirlpools. We may be able to row past all these obstacles into wide and pure waters, across the rapids, into warm fast currents, which will carry us, swiftly and beautifully, towards the object of the river's desires as it bears us along with it to its wide mouth, beyond which lies the unknown, gigantic, tempestuous and powerful Ocean.



From the nineteen fifties I remember the merging of schools for boys and for girls, which led to our being in school together with the girls starting with third grade. I also remember being run over by a tram when I was eleven. I remember the taste of mother's homemade sauerkraut, which she placed between the windows in a glass bucket, the jar of marinated mushrooms that broke to smithereens when it hit against the tile floor between the front doors, my going fishing in the country not far from Luga and my non-stop reading without any system or parental control. From the nineteen sixties I remember ten-year secondary education being extended to eleven years (for which we owed our gratitude to Nikita Khrushchev), and the anodized Pobeda watch which I bought with money earned after seventh grade when I was sent to a collective farm for agricultural training in the summer.

Nobody spent any time on my upbringing or education. My parents worked very hard, wrote scientific papers, defended their dissertation, once in a while they entertained friends and spent years, probably fifteen years, building our country house.

I was a quick and successful learner. My problems mainly manifested themselves in notations regarding my school conduct. And though it was not anything serious, merely some childish mischief, I was punished every time I got a “C” for “unsatisfactory behavior”. Once, when I was in fourth grade, Nina Petrovna, our math teacher, a plump round woman, wrote a problem down for us on the blackboard: “In 1 hour a worker at a factory produces 5 chairs.” She abbreviated the last word to the first two letters “ch”.

I interpreted it from my desk in the back of the room:

“The worker produces five children.”

Nina Petrovna told me to bring my parents to school. I remember being very worried that mom was going to brandish dad’s leather belt, like a helicopter propeller, in from of my face. But for some reason I wasn’t punished.

Another time, I think it was in fifth grade, I did something quite reprehensible and totally beyond any explanation.

During the break, in front of everyone, I came up to one of the girls, long-legged Alla, and grabbing the hem of her skirt I lifted it above her head. She was wearing pink underwear.

Once again, my parents were asked to come to school. And once again I expected a whipping, but for some unknown reason I was not punished for my crime.

But when I wrote a short four-letter word in the school corridor, I was immediately expelled from school. As they then called it, I was “black listed”. The severity of the punishment could probably be explained by the fact that I wrote this word under the portrait of grandfather Lenin sitting in his house in Gorky. Father had a long conversation with the school director, and they accepted me back, though they did transfer me to another class.

I was always a good student. I loved math and never had any problems writing compositions. I always chose a free subject and placed an epigraph at the beginning. It consisted of several lines. Underneath I wrote: “V.I. Lenin, volume such and such, page such and such”. Nobody ever dared question whether these were indeed Lenin’s words.

In 1963, during my entrance examinations at the Leningrad University then named after Zhdanov, I wrote a composition titled “Why do I want to become a physicist?” I started it with these words: “A physicist is the cosmic builder of our future”, or something of that

sort, and I signed it: “Khrushchev, from the speech at the 28th Plenary Meeting of the Communist Party Central Committee”. I was accepted.

When in 1967 I was trying to enter the producer’s department of the Leningrad Institute of Theater, Music and Cinematography, the course led by Izakin Abramovich Greenshpun, in a composition titled “Why do I want to become a producer?” I wrote: “A producer is the builder of human souls”, and I signed it: “K. Stanislavsky. ‘My Life in Art.’ Part 1”.



I frequently lied when I was a child. For the most part it had to do with saying I was older than my real age, attributing to myself non-existent accomplishments and forging my school records and the register. I became an expert in forging my parents’ signature, particularly my dad’s, and signed the register instead of my father, sometimes even making additional notations for the teacher. “Father” was supposedly commenting on the fact that his son had received a well-deserved punishment for the reprimand documented in the register. Later things became even better. I found out how to wash away entries in ink. This is all that I learned from my chemistry classes. But from the time I familiarized myself with this technique my mother began not only to examine my school records and the register but also to sniff them to check if they smelled of vinegar. Vinegar was indeed an inalienable component of this magical chemical preparation.

My mother invented a very cruel way to punish me for lying. She came to the conclusion that whipping did not produce the desired effect (as I lay on my stomach, with my teeth clenched, I thought: Just you wait. They’ll soon find out that you are a spy and you’ll get your just deserts). So mother figured out what would be a far worse punishment for me.

When she found me lying mother would take me to the barbershop to have me shaved bald. This was a cruel thing to do, but it worked. Once I actually ran away when we were already out in the street on the way the barbershop. I hid for twenty-four hours with student acquaintances of mine at the dormitory of the institute where my father was professor.

This happened in 1960, which meant I was fifteen. In the evening my parents found me in the dormitory, came for me and brought me home. I expected to be severely punished. So what followed took me completely by surprise.

Some time later that night father asked me to join him in his office. This was something new. My dad never punished me. He never laid a hand on me. I entered, trembling.

“Sit down.”

I perched on the edge of the chair.

“Andrei! I want to talk to you as one man to another. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I muttered.

“Tell me, how many times a week do you need a woman?”

The question was so unexpected that I was speechless, particularly since I was really just a kid at that time. When I gathered my senses, I mumbled modestly:

“Once a week.”

“Your mother and I decided that you don’t have to spent the night God knows where, in a dormitory, on somebody else’s bed sheets. You have your own room, and we permit you to bring your friends home. Our only request is that it shouldn’t reflect on our family’s life and on the upbringing of your younger brother. (Nikita was six years old at the time.)

I have to admit that parents are sometimes totally impossible to understand.

Shortly after my man-to-man conversation with my dad I found my new “identity”. I lost my virginity that same year, in the winter, one might say on a skating rink. It all started on the Maslyany meadow of the Central Park of Culture and Recreation.

In those days it was considered particularly cool among teenagers to meet a girl on a skating rink. Once you made a girl’s acquaintance, you were supposed to skate holding her by the hand, or, in rare instances, by the arm. Nobody, not even the most adventurous boys, hoped for anything beyond that in their youthful dreams.

I met with a girl and we started skating together, holding hands. Just the two of us. Then my friend Borya Yefimov joined us, and the three of us continued skating, still holding hands. But then, as we were on our way home in a packed tram, Borya whispered in my ear: “Let’s go to my place. My mom’s working the night shift today.”

The three of us went to his place, quietly and without making a fuss about it. Borya lived in a tiny one-room apartment not far from Teatralnaya Square. The room was divided in two by a thin veneer partition.

We had some tea, played on the guitar, sang some songs and told each other silly stories. It was getting late. Finally, at about midnight, Borya called me behind the partition and said in what seemed to be then a harsh, manly voice:

“Enough is enough. Let’s throw a coin to decide who goes first.”

I didn’t object. Moreover, I prayed to God that I shouldn’t be the first. I actually chickened out: it was all so unexpected. When, having won, Borya left, I lay on the bed right next to the partition and listened.

For quite a while I heard whispering behind the partition, inarticulate words of rejection the girl uttered lowering her voice, and then the creaking sound made by the sofa.

Borya was soon back. I pretended to be indifferent and asleep.

“Go now,” he said.

“What, are you done?”

“I wasn’t that interested,” Borya said casually. “I actually didn’t have an erection.”

I dived into the darkness behind the partition, as if it was cold water. Without seeing anything, I found the body lying on the sofa. She hadn’t taken off her clothes. I started fumbling in the dark.

“You shouldn’t do it,” she whispered, embracing my neck.

“I should. Don’t confuse me with Borya,” I said loudly, making sure I could be heard by the guy lying on the bed behind the partition and listening.

I can’t remember anything else. I only remember her whispering:

“What are you doing?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted, puzzled and breathing heavily. It was the first time I experienced the unbelievable sensation of an orgasm.

Later I understood what her question really meant.

We woke up early the following morning to make sure we got out before Borya’s mother returned from her shift. To my great joy and pride, the girl, who must have been about sixteen, huddled up to me, and in every way demonstrated her feelings for me. We got dressed.

“Can I have your phone number?” she asked.

“Right it down,” I dictated it loudly, deliberately confusing the numbers. Borya looked at me with wide-open eyes.

“Why did you give her the wrong number,” he asked me afterwards, speaking to me with respect as if I were the older of the two.

“I’m sick and tired of them. Girls call me every day. When you grow up, you’ll understand.”



I never found out whether or not he grew up. We didn't see each other again.



I completed the process of maturation on the “Vega” sailboat and, after forging my register school records for the first half of the ninth grade, for all times' sake, I enrolled at an evening school at the beginning of the winter semester. I can't say I attended school regularly, but our math teacher, who was also our homeroom teacher, often repeated: “Although he misses school frequently, he gets ‘A’s’ on all written tests.” In general, attendance rules at this school for adults were pretty lenient.

The school director with a nice name, Yezhov, who taught history, developed a strong disliking for me. He said once:

“You'll remember me at the final exams, I promise.”

The week of the finals came. I got good grades in all the other subjects and prepared myself as well as I could for the history exam; that is, I filled my pockets with cribs and hid the textbook under my armpit. I answered all the questions listed in my individual assignment, but the history teacher still gave me an “F”.

All my plans had collapsed. I had to postpone my University enrollment for a whole year. During the school graduation ball, which consisted of lots of vodka, sandwiches and dancing, there was a sudden blackout (I pulled out the fuses). In the complete darkness of the hallway somebody punched out director Yezhov, who was quite drunk.

Taking a bus ride home that night I lost a shoe and my watch. The following evening my father said to me:

“You are taking another history test tomorrow.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was at the regional department of education.”

I dragged myself to school unwillingly, not expecting anything good to come of it. This time I left the cribs and the textbook behind. In the office I was greeted by the smiling Yezhov, badly rumped, and with a black and blue bruise under his swollen eye.

“Take an assignment.”

“Why?”

“Maybe you'll tell me something.”

“And what if I can't.”

“Then I’ll only be able to give you a ‘C’.”

I couldn’t believe my eyes as I walked out of his office with a coveted “C”, “a grade of serenity”. On the threshold, unable to resist the temptation, I looked back:

“Who did that to you?” I asked.

The director glanced at me sadly, paused and answered philosophically:

“A class enemy.”

A month later I successfully passed the entrance exams and was admitted at the University. The competition for the physics department was at that time forty applicants for one slot.



I may have turned out to be a good physicist if I had ever completed the University curriculum. Probably I would then work at a lab and study solid-state physics. But I was not interested in solid states. I found the firm, slim bodies of young women considerably more exciting. I was also keen on sport, billiards, cards and rowdy company with substantial amounts of alcohol.

I somehow managed to survive till the end of freshman year. That summer I made friends with a group of actors, who were considerably older than myself, and, with their help, I found myself at the Lenfilm Studios, in the indescribable, unique atmosphere of film-making, with the actor’s buffet, the costume room and never-ending coffee drinking. I became familiar with the aura of being a “movie actor”, with port number thirteen and the adulation of young girls engaged in crowd scenes.

Attaching myself to professional actors I also pretended to be a professional, particularly since my appearance allowed me to do that. I was part of the gang, and we drank a lot together. This is how I found myself in Moscow with my actor friends, in the Bauman Garden, at the annual “job fair” for actors.

This colorful event deserves a separate description. Once a year, in August, artists from provincial theaters and producers from all over the country, looking to add actors to their troupe, gathered in the Bauman Garden. It was sometimes quite amusing to watch one of these “Top Artists”, cutting a ridiculous figure with his theatrical manner and exaggerated gestures, and speaking in an “accomplished voice”. This usually went well together with holes in his pockets and a never ceasing desire for a free drink.

There were four of us attending the “job fair”. My three friends did, indeed, want to join the troupe of a theater somewhere in the provinces – there were about five hundred such

theaters in the Soviet Union at that time – while I was just hanging out with them, and of course had no plans for an artistic career.

Nobody could anticipate what happened at the fair. None of the producers showed interest in my companions, however quite a few offered me jobs. At first I rejected the offers assuring them that I have already found a place for myself under the sun, and I have no intention of exchanging my main roles with the world-renowned Georgi Alexandrovich Tovstonogov at the Gorky Bolshoi Drama Theater for the part of the Second mushroom at a provincial children's theater. But after a while, I began to find it entertaining, and I started accepting the offers on condition that my actor friends were going to be given jobs as well. Over the course of one day I helped all of them find employment. One was promised a job in Uralsk, another in Chita and the last in Minusinsk. As for me, I said with dignity that I was going to consider their offers.

But before we knew it, we ran out of the seed money my friends received at the “job fair”. We needed money for food and booze, and, quite unexpectedly even for myself, I signed a contract with the head producer of the Drama Theater in the town of Leninabad, to be more precise, in the town called Leninabad-30 in Tajikistan, “a closed town” where you could live only if you had a special residence permit.

I lied insolently that I had completed studies at the studio of the Bolshoi Drama Theater. I received my seed money and was given the address of the theater. I also remembered the producer's funny last name, Solovei. Once the “business part” was over, my friends and I departed for the closest drinking joint. It soon transpired that I had exactly one month until the beginning of my career at the theater.

In all probability, it was my mother's absence that decided my future destiny. That September she went away for her only business trip outside the Soviet Union: for a geological congress in Holland. Strange as it may seem, my dad did not resent my crazy idea. He bought me some necessities and organized a farewell party in our apartment on Liteiny Avenue. I made a momentous if gloriously drunk departure, wearing a new coat, a mohair scarf and a hat, and carrying two canary-yellow leather suitcases. I also carried with me the “aura of a movie actor from Leningrad” and a complete absence of any knowledge whatsoever about acting or any theater experience.

In the year that followed I changed three theaters after being thrown out of the first one with disgrace (the new hat and the yellow suitcases were not much help). After that I already had some superficial knowledge about theatrical methods and techniques, and had some positive experience working at a Novgorod theater. I applied to the Leningrad Theater Institute on Mokhovaya Street and was accepted. This signified the end of the era of precise sciences, the University and card games in the lecture hall of the history department.

Life opened a new door before me, which led to the alluring world of the theater, of applause, eulogizing reviews, first performances and honorable titles. I fell in love with this world. I turned out to be a gifted producer and learned to admire the difficulties and obstacles one faces when making a living in the theater. I walked this road honestly, overcoming professional hardships and delighting in my successes, for a total of fourteen years. I played some good parts and staged more than forty plays. I believed that what I was doing on the stage was important for some people, and I tried to act honestly in my work with the artists. I also knew the main motif of my career as a theater producer – it was the theme of the tragedy of the unhappy Russian intelligentsia, which was swept away by the destructive wave of Bolshevik revolutionary terror. I produced Mikhail Bulgakov's "Escape" and "The days of the Turbins" and did my own interpretation of Alexei Tolstoi's novel "Emigrants". These were plays about the heights of the Russian soul and the inherent generosity of Russian people. In the finale First Lieutenant Nalymov shot himself because he could not bear his life as a waiter at a French bistro.

There were more than a few "passing" plays, which were produced quickly and without a hitch, in the interests of the plan requirements for the theater's repertoire and in the hope for extra pay, that is an additional fee paid to the producer for a play produced in addition to the annually prescribed number. The prescribed number was in itself no small matter—three plays a season. I had the good fortune to receive professional training as a producer at the Theater named after V.F. Kommissarzhevskaya, to have rehearsals with wonderful actors, to be good friends with Valdis Lentsevicius and Sergei Boyarsky, both of whom died prematurely. To this day I cherish a very special, warm and affectionate feeling for this theater and its actors.

I could have finished my training as a sailor at the "Shmonka", the marine school, and, at the advice of my sailor friends I would have become a professional sailor.

I could have completed my University curriculum and become a rather good physicist, using my natural penchant for precise sciences.

I could still be working in the theater, producing plays and tutoring students at the Theater Institute.

I could have drunk myself into the grave, committed suicide or be killed in a drunken brawl, as many of my former drinking buddies.

But life opened a door before me.

This door was located on the third floor of a once beautiful old building at the corner of Vladimirsky Avenue and Stremyannaya Street. The building had been transformed by the

Bolsheviks into a socialist communal property. I entered the apartment, carrying a bottle of vodka under my arm, having no inkling where this road will lead me.



The once luxurious front staircase of the building on the corner of Vladimirsky and Stremyannaya, with remnants of old molding, with empty spaces in the niches, where statues once stood, and with time-worn marble windowsills, with empty wine bottles and glass tumblers hanging tidily from the tap of the radiators (a symbol of the eternal brotherhood of all drunks), with a puddle of stale urine retaining the never evaporating smell of cheap “Agdam” port, with scraps of old newspapers, wrapping from processed cheese and colorful graffiti on the walls – all this resembled part of a theater decoration for an eerie Soviet grotesque tragedy.

On the third floor I fumbled in the darkness for the broken switch and forced the dusty electric lamp to give me a last welcoming wink. The lamp was hanging on a bit of cord in the place once occupied by a crystal chandelier. The hooks hanging from the ceiling were all that remained from the chandeliers which once graced the staircase landings. The lamps gave little signs of life; they seemed to be waiting to see the finale of the lives of those who frequently visited the staircase and, for the time being, left their glass tumblers on the radiator tubes.

The lamp lit up for a second only to shed its murky light on the once gorgeous carved wooden door, which was now sadly ruined by numerous bells, planks with strange family names and television cables. As a crooked grin from the past, the door still carried a brass plaque with a clearly discernible engraving: “Professor Shuster. Venereal diseases.”

My pal Yura, “an artiste of the Imperial Theaters”, as he liked to call himself, occupied a small room, long and dark like an intestine, to the left of the entrance door, which used to be either the maid’s quarters, or the office of the pharmacy clerk.

We met a few years before at the Lenfilm Studios, where he, a gifted character actor frequently played episodes “with words” and had small parts, while I, still a student at the Theater Institute, tried to make some extra cash participating in crowd scenes or acting in small silent episodes.

Yura had a visible advantage over most of my studio friends, even though he, too, never refused a drink. Nevertheless he looked somehow steadier, older and more reliable than the others. He also worked as an actor in one of the drama theaters, which already placed him “in a higher caste”, above the other movie low lives.

He shared the ugly room with his sweet, charming and amiable young wife Lena, who always set the table without any signs of irritation and then joined her husband in his frequent heavy drinking sprees.

That day he wanted to have a drink but, as usual, he had no money. So I was invited, or, rather, summoned over the phone in the capacity of an “ambulance”, with a half-liter “injection” hidden in my pocket.

God was my Shepherd, when I walked up the filthy stairway. He brought me to that communal flat and, after we had a few drinks, He pointed out to me something in the corner of Yura’s room. There, between a hand-made bookcase-secretaire, with an engraved portrait of the owner on its top, and an aquarium with dead goldfish, I found a small, special and unusual-looking work desk, covered with a pile of instruments.

“What is this, Yura?”

Yura was embarrassed and hunched his shoulders. It was obvious that he had wanted to put the instruments away and cover up the desk, but didn’t have the time. So he now had to open up to me.

“My dad was a jeweler. He taught me a little when I was a kid. I later even worked as an engraver. So I do a bit of the stuff now, too. I repair rings, earrings and what not for some of the ladies at the theater. Please don’t tell anyone... You know, it’s against the law...”

Firstly, I had no idea it was against the law. How would I know? Secondly, we finished the bottle of vodka, and we were capable of consuming considerably more at the time. We had no one to borrow money from, because we had borrowed all the money we could already.

“Yura, so what’s the big deal?! You are a jeweler! Go make something fast, a ring or something. I’ll do my best to help. I can buff it up or polish it, and we’ll start from there!”

“I’m not in the right mood now ... and, in general, how do you plan to sell it... I very much doubt...”

“Stop whining. Trying may not lead to crying, as Stalin’s pal, party boss Comrade Berya used to say!”

We sat down next to each other. For the first time in my life I picked up these distinctive jeweler’s tools, carved a piece of genuine silver wire with a needle file and polished it on a special hair wheel. Then I walked to the “Moscow” Restaurant round the corner and returned in no time with two bottles of vodka and a some hotdogs.

Twenty-five years had passed since that fateful day.

# THE ADVENTURES OF A RUSSIAN IN ITALY

A far from elderly though not exactly a young man was smoking contraband “Marlboro ultra light”, looking thoughtfully at the ocean splashing under his feet...

It would be a beautiful place if he were to describe it... “The Pacific”, or “the Atlantic” ... and he could add something about the curly white crests on the waves or about the sky, drowning in the azure water at the line of the horizon... But there was one hitch – the man didn’t know the name of this water reservoir. He had studied geography quite a while ago, and he felt embarrassed to ask the locals. And actually he didn’t really need to know. It already made him happy that the sides of the plane were adorned with the words “Air Jamaica”, and his first class seats allowed him to stretch out his legs and place them on a comfortable foot bench....

He barely listened to the colorful presentation of the travel bureau director describing the benefits of staying at that particular hotel, which was to host him on the shores of the unknown water reservoir – an ocean or possibly a sea. The only thing he recalled from his school days was that Cuba was supposed to be somewhere not too far away, and he also remembered a song popular in his youth -- “Jamaica, Jamaica” -- sung by the Italian lad Robertino, who was very much in vogue in those days.

He didn’t really care where he was flying, so long as he could get as far as possible from himself. He wanted to get away from all the problems connected with his upcoming divorce, from the locked doors behind which he could hear the voices of his children, from the gossip of his co-workers and neighbors, and from his own bitter thoughts. He wanted to fly away and get a healthy tan, so that his image would stop insulting the mirror. Then he would be ready to fly back and forget this country, and the name of the hotel, and the white cottages with their brightly painted window frames, and the smell of the local cuisine.

He never liked traveling on a tour. He didn’t enjoy being in a crowd and following instructions.... “Look to the left ... look to the right.... You see in front of you the Church of the Saint of ... built in the ... teenth century.” He would never keep these names and “memorial sights” in his memory, and they would vanish without a trace like a mirage. Just like one night stands.... One cannot get a feel of the country, understand its people and remember its sights by name, turning one’s head to the left and then to the right.... But one can decide to stay there for at least a week, and then one has a chance to find out something about the city, about the woman, about the church or about the street....

This is exactly how it happened in Milan.

This was at the very start of the *perestroika*. He was an inexperienced businessman, a self-starter, wearing a steel-colored suit out of natural silk, as it turned out a very

expensive one, which he bought second hand and which must have been stolen from somebody. As he was looking out of a cab window he saw the Dome Cathedral, and he rented a room with windows facing the Cathedral Square in a cheap little hotel....

Frankly speaking, he had studied the list of Milan hotels in a tourist guide on the way from the airport. It would have been more comfortable and prestigious to stay at the Hilton, for instance, but he would have had to pay almost six hundred dollars for one night. All he had in his pocket was two thousand, and even that was considered contraband. In those days one was only allowed to exchange two hundred and sixty rubles at the OVIR, which was approximately one hundred dollars. He also brought with him five Easter eggs – five tiny medallions covered with transparent pastel enamel. These lockets will play a special role in this story, but we will have a chance to talk about this later.

His tiny hotel was not that cheap either – it cost a hundred dollars per night. When he walked into his premises, he discovered it was not really a room, but more like a closet – a tiny window, a narrow folding bed, a small bathroom with a toilet, which had to be lowered from a niche in the wall and then folded back into the wall – the latest technical innovation. But nevertheless he had a roof over his head, a bed to sleep in, and he was not expecting visitors. Moreover, there was no one near by who could have spoken about him in the third person with enthusiasm.... Too bad.... As you, dear readers, have already guessed, this beginning businessman was none other than the author of this book Andrei Ananov....



I took a “mini-shower”, changed into my shiny suit the color of steel and walked down to the reception hall looking dandy. It then became clear to me where I was -- the hotel bar was filled with black men and their girlfriends purchased for the night. So that’s why I was asked at registration whether I intended to stay till the next day or only needed a few hours.... The clerk was clearly surprised when I said I was staying for a whole week.

I went out into the street. It was a lovely day. There were a lot of people in the square in front of the cathedral. Some were feeding the pigeons, which flew low over our heads, almost hitting us with their wings. So I was not so much looking around as looking upwards, afraid that the pigeons might ruin my beautiful shiny suit.

A nice car suddenly pulled up not far from me, and the woman who was sitting next to the driver asked something in Italian. Of her long phrase I made out only two words “Discothèque Rosie”....

The car left. I walked along and thought to myself:

“If she asked me about the discothèque it has to be somewhere close by. And if this well dressed woman, not exactly a teenager, was heading there, it means the place is not for youngsters.”



I hailed a cab and said: “Discothèque Rosie”....

The Discothèque Rosie did indeed turn out to be a classy and respectable place. The ladies were wearing open dresses and the men had expensive suits on. I ordered a “Don Perineon”, even though I barely drank anything at the time. But I was told that waiters feel great respect for clients who slowly sip this expensive champagne...

The champagne was standing untouched on my table and losing its taste. I felt bad to be leaving a full bottle, so I offered it to three young Italians who were sitting at a table next to mine. We were soon friends and went together to another bar, and then a third one. The expensive champagne, my silvery suit and my business card, which said that I was president of a jewelry firm, must have impressed the Italians. In addition, this was a time when everything Russian aroused interest.

It was getting late, and I knew in advance what phrase I was going to hear from my new Italian acquaintances in parting. I guessed right.

“Mr. Ananov, what hotel would you like us to take you to?”

“The ‘Hilton’.”

The Mercedes 600 pulled up smoothly and stopped at the doors of the five-star hotel. The bellboy bent over three times and opened the doors wide in front of me. I loitered in the registration area for five minutes or so, walked out looking like a bored millionaire and took a cab, which drove me to the closet of a room in my shady hotel.

My first evening in Milan ended successfully. However, my funds were evaporating with terrible speed.

The next morning I shoved my five contraband Easter eggs in my pocket and went to an antique store, which I had noticed on the way the previous night.

The young Italian spent quite a while telling the well-dressed gentleman about his high professional reputation, assuring him that his father was the main antiques dealer in all of Italy, while he was the main antiques dealer in Milan. I nodded in agreement and expressed my amazement. He treated me to coffee and cognac.

Then I took out one of my Easter eggs.

The young antiques dealer, the best expert in Milan, placed a magnifying glass in his eye and started closely examining the egg. I pretended that I was a rich collector who was temporarily out of cash....

“How much do you want for it?”

I named an amount, which at that time seemed huge to me, something like two hundred fifty dollars, and then I took out three other eggs, also without any stamps or insignia.

“I will take all of them without bargaining. Please wait a second, so that I can get the necessary amount from the cash machine at the corner.”

Five minutes later the best antique dealer in Milan was handing me an amount in liras that was quite impressive in those days. He was clearly proud of his resolution and professional expertise. I couldn't resist the temptation and asked him:

“Tell me, why did you decide to purchase these objects without any hesitation, even though they don't have the name of the master or any stamps, or insignia?”

The best antique dealer in Milan looked at me as if I were a guileless child and announced in an important and condescending voice:

“Any expert in Russian antiques would have no problem distinguishing between a forgery and genuine art. In this particular case I have absolutely no doubt that these are old Russian items. Possibly even from the workshop of Faberge himself.... By the way, let me see your passport, I must record the transaction in my purchase log.”

At that point I could have said good by and left. But I was bursting with pride, and as I was saying the usual words of parting, I couldn't keep the truth from him any longer.... I took the fifth egg, which I had set aside in advance, out of my other pocket. It had on it the stamp with my name – Ananov.

“Dear colleague! Thank you very much for your hospitable welcome and your informative lecture on Russian art. Now, before we part, let me make you a small gift.”

With this I handed him the fifth egg.

The son of the best antique dealer in all of Italy once again placed the magnifier in his eye. His face slowly acquired the color of a ripe cherry.... He understood everything.

“If you are no longer satisfied with our transaction I can return you the money,” I gave the self-esteem of the Italian youth a final knockout.

“I am quite satisfied,” the antique dealer retorted in a disgruntled but proud tone. “If I was unable to tell that it was a new work, my clients will surely not be able to tell it!”

I left the store.



...When we parted near the doors of the Hilton, my three Italian acquaintances and I agreed to meet the following day, again at “The Rosie”. Once again we drove in a Mercedes 600, hopped from one bar to another and had dinner at an expensive restaurant, and once again the car dropped me off by the entrance of the fancy hotel. However, this time my acquaintances were eager to see me off to the doors of my suite....

With the pretext of a bad headache I “tore myself away from my persecutors” with great difficulty and, after walking around the registration hall for a while, I soon found myself once again in my shabby two-star hotel. I sat on the only chair in my tiny room and became lost in thought....

...I wouldn’t get away so easily on my third night...The third night would end in disaster, particularly since we agreed to meet in the daytime so that we could discuss possibilities to do business together and then have dinner. And if it becomes apparent at the end of the evening that I am nothing but a liar and pretender, I will not be able to forget the disgrace for a long time....

I counted my cash, reserved a 600-hundred dollar suite at the Hilton for one night and went to bed.

At 11 a.m. sharp I entered the doors of my deluxe suite. I heard the telephone ringing before the porter had a chance to bring in my suitcases.

When I picked up the receiver I heard the familiar voice of my Italian friend.

“Andrei, we are running a little late and we’ll pick you up at the hotel....”

“Okay.”

My God, what if I had arrived at the Hilton 10 minutes later?!...

## **AN ACE IN MY SLEEVE**

In those years I was just starting off my business. I dreamed about establishing a joint enterprise with a foreign company. I clearly suffered from lack of personal experience and demonstrated insufficient faith in my own possibilities. But nobody except for myself was aware of this. As far as everyone else, I exuded confidence, infected others with it and struggled energetically, learning to swim in the swirling waters of doubtful cleanliness then referred to as Russian business or else capitalism with a Russian face....

I never tried to earn easy money, since I knew through experience that everything that quickly comes your way leaves you just as quickly. And besides, I loved my work as a jeweler, just as I loved the theater before that. I was also ambitious and self conceited. I

remember seeing one of the very first private stores in Petersburg at the beginning of the *perestroika*. It belonged to Vitalik, an old friend of mine, who was known by his nickname Vetal. Plaster with mica covered the walls, the saleswomen were wearing attractive uniforms, there were wrought iron grilles on the windows, and the private chef was wearing a white cap. I walked out of the store dumbfounded.... I was never jealous of anyone or anything, but other people's successes motivated me to strive for my own victories. I said to myself, "Ananov, you should make it even better." And with this in mind I went to the Europa Hotel, where I started with a small kiosk, leasing a small space in a conference room. Six months later I opened the first private jewelry salon in Russia in the best of the hotel's premises, with five huge shop windows on the façade of the building.

The Europa Hotel deserves a separate story.



It is here I spent practically my entire life. Years ago, when I was young, I frequently went to the hotel for a cup of coffee, then, after I had made a little money, I celebrated every holiday there, my wedding and my divorce from my first wife Valya, my wedding with my third wife Larissa, mine and other people's birthdays. The staff of the restaurant on the second floor knew me very well. It was an old hall upholstered with oak, with individual cabinets on the mezzanine floor.... A multitude of funny and sometimes dramatic episodes occurred to me in this historic hall.... It was here that I, stunned by my first wife's unfaithfulness, got drunk and tossed my wedding ring, jingling lightly, across the parquet oak floor, in the far corner of the room. It was here that I first had a fight with the talented film producer Vitya Titov and then struck a close friendship with him. Here, on New Year's Eve I once lost my new car in a game of pool to a well-known cardsharp, but at the last moment, frenziedly shifting a card (set a thief to catch a thief), I won it back. It is here that I brought two KGB investigators from the Big House on Liteiny Avenue for an all-you-can-eat lunch right before a confrontation. I had been arrested for having a jewelry business in my home and expected to serve time, but quite surprisingly I was released three hours later, after winning in confrontation with the culprit who sold me out. I got out; not fully believing that I was free ... and the first thing I did was to go to Europa for a drink to celebrate my victory.

And when I returned to the five-star hotel, which had been renovated by a Swiss company, and opened a jewelry salon there, the best at the time, proudly placing the name of "Ananov" above its doors – I felt that I had completed the circle of my life....

And this meant that even though the path of my life wasn't smooth, it was right....

Now, too, I once in a while have dinner in the lavish oak-paneled restaurant hall of the hotel, though I moved the salon not far away, to a historical building of the Silver Rows on Nevsky 31 a few years ago.



However, I have digressed from my recollections of how I started my jewelry business.... I can't tell you how difficult it all was then, in the late nineteen eighties. The workshop existed already and was making jewelry, but I didn't have a store. Soviet jewelry stores did not yet accept anything made by "individual jewelers" for resale, so that I could only rely on export and on my personal connections and my old clients from the days when I worked "underground".

In those days I had an acquaintance by the name of Edik, who was also a client. He lived in Moscow, but was planning to emigrate to Los-Angeles. Once a month I would deliver my Easter egg lockets to him in person. He took whole parties of them, forty-fifty at a time, and paid me in cash right away. He probably later gave them to a number of his associates for resale. It was there, in Moscow that the stamp with two letters, KF, miraculously appeared on my Easter eggs.... Experts know very well what these two letters mean.... Strange as it may seem, all the transactions with Edik were completely official. I received the medallions at the workshop strictly in accordance with the waybill, and, upon returning from my business trip, I officially handed over the cash to the cashier with a receipt, indicating the truly high payment for the goods. It was all quite simple – I needed non-cash funds to pay for renting the workshop premises, for employee salaries, for purchasing gold and silver, as well as many other business expenses.

It was these official sales procedures and the accurately stapled bunches of waybills and receipts, which somehow survived in the accounting archives until years later that rescued me from the assault of the tax police in the early nineteen nineties and from complete ruin....

If I remember right, it happened in 1994.

The first problems encountered by the workshop at the initial stage were already a thing of the past. For two years already I had a contract with the French "Faberge" company formalizing the trademark "Faberge from Ananov", the first such trademark in the history of jewelry art. The salon at the Europa was already working quite successfully and I was putting a lot of effort into winning over France and making plans to open a store at the "Ritz Hotel" on Vendome Square in Paris. My exhibitions had already created quite a stir in Monte-Carlo, Genoa and Madrid.

Then, out of the blue, when I had no expectation of danger, I was summoned to a new organization called the tax police, something unheard of before and already getting the reputation of a notorious institution to be feared....

It must be said that in those initial years of its existence the tax police functioned according to somewhat unusual rules – it officially kept ten percent of the funds expropriated from its "clients". This allowed it to quickly become a wealthy and technically well-equipped entity, naturally interested in expanding its "profits". And

though this system could be compared with a situation in which a referee on the soccer field would receive remuneration commensurate with the number of scores, the system nevertheless functioned and did so quite successfully. Not surprisingly, they chose “clients” with money, and the rest was, so to say, a matter of expertise.... The millstones of the tax police had already grinded the largest fur company in St. Petersburg, which incapacitated its production and led to enormous losses. It was now the turn of my beloved Europa Hotel.

As it turned out, the CEOs of the Europa-Hotel, Inc. were not entirely without fault either. The Swiss firm, which was contracted to reconstruct the hotel and which headed this joint enterprise, transferred all of its profits to Sweden immediately, and now the hotel was required to pay a huge amount, dozens of millions of dollars, in owed taxes and penalties. The tax police established itself at the hotel seriously and for quite a while, thoroughly checking all the accounts and bookkeeping practices. It was the period when I just started my business at the Europa and opened the store there that was going to be subjected to a painstaking review.

... The police investigators smiled happily as they politely asked me to take a seat.

“Yes, we know very well about your successes. We also read chapters from your book, which you published in a magazine ... we mean those where you described the search in your apartment.... So please excuse us, but we will do our best not to give you material to write a new chapter about us, we promise that.”

They were clearly referring to the episode in the chapter titled “The Search”, where I described the dumb KGB major, who allowed me to inconspicuously hide a gold nugget in a bowl of cabbage soup under his very nose....

“Here, dear Mr. Ananov, will you please take a look at that?”

And they handed me several sheets of paper – photocopies of accounting documents. I immediately noticed my signatures on them....



...We started unfolding our business at the Europa on a low burner. First, the hotel director, a charismatic Swiss gentleman, asked me to show some of my jewelry items to his friends who came for a visit at Christmas time. We were offered a room on the mezzanine floor, which opened into a beautiful hall, decorated with large artificial trees, with a bar, a large number of small tables across the premises and attractive waitresses. The place was always filled with a lively crowd.... A year later a banquet was held in this same hall dedicated to the opening of my salon.

The director’s acquaintances purchased several pieces of jewelry from me, and after thinking it over at home that evening, I asked the management to rent me the room the

next morning. The management agreed and we started selling our goods. With this purpose in mind, I hired, through a strict selection process, several intelligent, attractive and long-legged saleswomen. All of them had to have a higher education and speak a foreign language.

Everything would have been fine, except for the fact that I was not able to resolve one problem for a long time – it was in what form I could accept payment from my clients. For the most part, they were all foreigners at that time, and they paid with credit cards. Those visiting Russia from other countries were afraid to carry cash with them in those days....

It was again the hotel that came to my rescue, and for a small percent the management agreed to accept credit card payments of our clients for their purchases. At the end of each month I received the total amount at the hotel bookkeeping office. I received the payments in dollars, signing the expense log.

We worked this way for approximately a year and a half. By the end we were already renting two rooms, not one, we had a sign and had arranged our own shop windows. We looked like a nice store, our profits were growing fast, and I was able to improve my business considerably with this money. I bought quality instruments, invited a new group of students from among jewelers and later, when we expanded and moved to the first floor of the hotel, I used these funds to decorate the salon. I bought furniture made to order in the “Buleau” style – black wood, bronze and faux turtle shell finishing. I brought carpeting from Paris and hung up beautiful bronze chandeliers in the store. Using these funds, I made many other purchases and investments in the business. In other words, I spent all our earnings on improving production and expanding sales.

I then opened my salon with two beautiful entrance doors and five shop windows, looking out onto the building’s façade. I dressed my saleswomen in black velvet outfits – jackets with gold company emblems on their chests and mini skirts – had the floor covered with dark green carpeting, hung dark green velvet curtains on the windows and placed the furniture of black wood, with bronze and faux turtle shell finishing in its places. I now had a gorgeous 300 feet hall, a salon, which became my pride and also the pride of the hotel. I was on occasion asked for permission to hold an important event in the premises and I never refused. Word about what was considered one of Europe’s best jewelry salons, which had opened its doors at the Europa Hotel quickly spread around the world....



I must say that during the entire time that we conducted sales on the mezzanine floor I experienced some concern regarding the legal “impeccability” of my entrepreneurial efforts, which on a monthly basis gave me large sums of money in foreign currency. Once I opened my salon I acquired the right to accept credit cards on my own, and I immediately abandoned my cash business. More than that, I even forbade my salespeople

to accept cash as payment for purchases. This was one of the things that protected me from being assaulted by racketeers, which was common practice in Russia in those days. Even if this somewhat decreased our sales, it allowed us to sleep in peace. Though some people were not able to sleep in peace.

When I calculated exactly how much my business had received in cash prior to the opening of the salon, I felt a little uneasy....

However, as time went on and the salon was successfully functioning, I started to forget my concern.

Now, when the tax police summoned me, I received all the copies of my expense orders, accompanied by the sweet smiles of the officers in charge. The final amount, written in bold at the bottom, contained six zeros. I suddenly felt very hot and experienced a strong desire to wake up as a little boy....

Instead of the bundle of copies I was now holding two pieces of paper in my hand. One ordered me to pay over half a million dollars within the next five days and the other – an even larger amount, but within ten days.

“And that will be all!” the police inspectors announced almost in chorus. “We will then let you go in peace! You will have the opportunity to work and write your stories.... Too bad that you will never get to write about us....”

I walked out of the room.

I continued going to work as if nothing had happened, met with clients at the salon and designed new models, concealing the fact of the inevitable collapse of my company from everyone including my wife. You can well imagine how I felt inside! I stopped smiling, and no matter what I was doing or where I was, I could think of one thing only. Within five-ten days I would be finished. And the main thing was that nothing would have happened to me if those blasted Swiss guys hadn't turned out to be thieves. This whole business was so upsetting. The police weren't even trying to get me – it was just a coincidence.... But it did come up.... What a shame.

As I lay in bed, trying in vain to fall asleep I could think of nothing else. I thought about what could be done to save my creation, my private jewelry company, the first of its kind in Russia, how not to give up our considerable successes, and, most importantly, how not to lose the group of master jewelers, who studied the trade under me and learned to believe in me.

I thought about it non-stop for a whole week and, having weighed all the pros and cons, decided to take a risk.



They were waiting for me at the tax police.

They waited hoping to get me to sign the papers confirming that I agreed with their verdict, so that they could set the clock ticking.... It would then start ticking loudly, counting out first five and then ten days.

I didn't have this kind of money, and I had nowhere to get it. Whether it was in five days nor in ten.

And this meant that the company would be seized and auctioned, the salon would be closed, and all my velvet curtains, my furniture covered with black polish with faux turtle shell finish, my chandeliers and jewelry would be taken away to repay my debt. Both my new students and already experienced jewelers would find themselves jobless.

I took the document and wrote with a firm hand:

“Do not agree.”

And I signed it.

“Ananov.”

Expressing my disagreement on paper gave me a small chance to survive, but it also increased the risk tenfold. Had I paid the debt, nobody would have put forth any other claims, or so the tax inspectors assured me. The company would then continue to exist, and I would no longer be threatened with jail. Mind you, article 88, so well familiar to me, had not yet been abolished, and the foreign currency which I received at the hotel's accounting office was specifically in the focus of this frightening article. As for the amount of the received currency ... I preferred not to even think about that. It was more than ten years of jail time. It could carry with it the death penalty....

On the other hand, why would I want to live if everything that I had created with such difficulty, step by step, without debts and credit, without the help of partners, whom I never had, without risky ventures, without connections in the criminal world where I could get stolen diamonds and technical platinum – if all of this suddenly fell apart. How would I be able to look in the eye of the people who believed in me and for whom the workshop was their home away from home.

These were my thoughts at the time. I didn't even know then that if I did pay this debt, this would have been the beginning, not the end of the story.... It would have been the beginning of a criminal procedure. But the charming tax inspectors did not say a word about this.

I walked out of the office again, keeping a copy of the paper I had just signed. Nobody tried to prevent me from leaving.

The next day I had to fly to Paris.



The plane was climbing upwards, carrying me further away from the gray St. Petersburg sky that shrouded the city with an unpleasant prickly drizzle. I was leaving behind the gray building of the tax police, ominously lurking in the side street near Ligovka, and my daily worries about how I was going to pay my employees' salaries the next month. Still, I took my thoughts with me on the plane.

On the one hand, I did break the law by not placing the company earnings in the bank and thus avoiding taxes, but on the other I didn't put this money in my pocket or transfer it to the West as many others did in those years. I invested it, as a good entrepreneur, in production, in getting on my feet and expanding my business. And now this was a serious enterprise working at full capacity and making all transactions through the bank. It was currently paying considerably higher taxes than it would have if it had remained at its initial stage or if it had become a joint venture with a foreign entity, where part of the profit would have been channeled abroad. What's more, I had provided training to dozens of people who became world-class masters. I gave them work and I am paying them a decent salary. I taught them to love the unhurried and subtle work of a jeweler, and my salon – its classy appearance and the jewelry art in its shop windows – all of this is my contribution to the prestige of St. Petersburg and Russia as a whole. And what about my shows? Madrid, Stockholm, London, Paris, Monte-Carlo.... Our art was admired everywhere, and people had a hard time believing that such beauty was created in a poor country, at a time of chaos and gangsters. We were asked to sell our goods, but we refused. If only the visitors of our shows knew why? We didn't sell anything because our ridiculous customs laws did not allow the sale of exhibition items. The customs for some reason considered them to be the property of the state, though they were clearly the property of the company. The customs called these items unique. Yes, we agreed, that is precisely why we are exhibiting them. The thing is that we are unable to make items of a lower quality....

When visitors asked us at our shows why we had brought our merchandize if we refused to sell it, we didn't explain to them for quite a while that we were forbidden by the customs to do that (they wouldn't have understood such nonsense anyway). Instead, we answered proudly:

“We brought our goods to win your respect.”

But on the other hand, all this is nothing but a mental exercise and an outpouring of emotions. In reality I was being charged with violating financial regulations, and I knew very well what I was placing at risk. And it was more likely than not that in the end I

would have to exclaim: “My goodness, it fell through,” to use the words of Krechinsky from the well-known play by Sukhovo-Kobylin.

And I would be asked to cross my hands behind my back.

Different thoughts occurred to me. What if I were just to call my family and seek refuge here, in the civilized part of the world, where a number of large companies had long been offering me the position of their head jeweler and a salary that would allow me never to worry about the future? All the more so, since my Parisian friend had offered me his apartment in the city center, his garage had quite a few cars and I was permitted to use any one I liked. There was also a store right across the street with a sweet name “Shopi”, where the shelves were sagging under the weight of products with bright labels, unlike the empty counters in Russian stores. Why would anyone want to live in this poor, lawless, starving country, which had been sold out by the Bolsheviks year ago, amidst embittered and miserable people, who looked askance at anyone who was doing well and who never distinguished between thieves and hard workers or artists? If I stayed, my children would go out happily with their beautiful young mother, and they would learn French, like my grandmother, and we would eat food without nitrates and certainly without nitrites, and there would be no gangsters, and even though we would have the police, but it wouldn’t be tax police....

And after dreaming about this wonderful life and purchasing everything I had in mind when I flew to Paris – gold and silver for my workshop – I soon flew back home, to my family, my friends, colleagues and students. To the embittered and miserable people, who were also kind and compassionate and who spoke my native tongue, to my compatriots, to the gray rainy sky and the clumsy customs officers, to the bad roads and bloodthirsty bureaucrats, to empty store shelves and beggars scavenging in the trash, to the charismatic and scary tax police inspectors, to nitrates and nitrites.

I flew back home....



By the way, I must mention in passing that the gold and silver purchased in Paris had to be brought to Russia each time secretly, as contraband. And the reason was that gold could be bought in one place only in those days – at the factory of special alloys in Moscow. One had to fill in an endless amount of paperwork and prepay the full amount in advance through the bank. Then one had to wait until the bank put this money to use several times before it transferred it to the addressee. The price of the precious metals was almost twice their price on the world market plus an additional charge because they were being sold to an individual business.... That is why I was forced to participate in a ridiculous operation, concealing the metals I was bringing with me. If I didn’t I would have had to pay an amount to the customs authorities equal to their original price, and, what’s more, make the payment in foreign currency. Then, no later than six months later, I was supposed to export jewelry items corresponding in weight to the imported metals. Then I was to spend God knows how much time trying to recover the deposit, and maybe,

with some luck, I would be able to get it back at an exchange rate, which had decreased twice over in that time.

This explains why I traveled back and forth, hiding plates weighing three pounds each, now in one place, now in another. I will not say exactly where I hid them. Just in case....

That's why I became used to constant risk, to evaluating situations in my mind all the time, to feeling the ground, so to say, before I made a step. I was accustomed to looking about me unnoticed and listening without others being aware. I was like a radar piercing the heavy storm clouds with its invisible rays. And when it suddenly came across a tiny dot shining on the screen, it gave the command, followed by a salvo.

So I came back, and then I made many more flights to Paris and back home, bringing with me now precious metals, now a baby carriage, now simple gifts, but whatever it was, I always carried with me my heavy-laden, gloomy thoughts.

I have to say that the "execution of the sentence" was somewhat delayed, since after I received a copy of the act signed with what is officially referred to as "with differences of opinion", I mailed a copy and a letter to Moscow asking the authorities to "resolve the differences". The letter was addressed to the chief of the tax police of Russia. And while they were trying "to resolve" matters there, I had the benefit of complete freedom of movement, though I never stopped wracking my brains in search of a way out. I couldn't sleep at night, smoking heavily and drinking strong coffee. I would get out of bed quietly so as not to wake up my wife, sit in the kitchen and think, going back in my thoughts to the years when this whole quagmire began.... I looked for a way out, like a cockroach moving its antennae as it crawls across the bottom of a tall glass jar....

True enough, I cannot complain about the behavior of the police – they were quite polite and respectful. I probably earned this kind of attitude thanks to my many years of hard work. Magazine articles and the documentary film "My Father Said to Me...", a talented tape by producer M. Mikheyev, which was shown on the wide screen, must have also played a role.

Apart from this, my letter to Moscow also had an impact on the situation. The Committee demanded to see the documents, though not without some delay, and this meant that I would have to spend nobody knew how much more time sitting in the kitchen at night, drinking coffee and thinking....

Little Nastya was by now already babbling in her own language, which no one except for her mother could understand. She had already experienced the terrible episode when local doctors diagnosed her strong reaction to a high fever as meningitis, encephalitis and God knows what else. Nastya was already saved by a miracle and by the intervention of Prince of Monaco Rainier III – God give him good health – who organized a doctors' conference in Nice, at the best children's hospital in France. Nastya had already

recovered, and two of my large exhibitions had already taken place in Madrid and Monte-Carlo, but I was still thinking, thinking and twitching my antennae....

And finally an idea occurred to me.



As I recalled the minutest details of what happened in those years, when I had just started my workshop, I remembered about Edik, my Moscow friend and client, who every month acquired my Easter egg lockets, the thick bundles of cash that I brought back after meeting with him, the stacks of receipts according to which I handed the money over to the cashier. I also remembered the waybills filled in my name when I was receiving the merchandise from our storeroom. And I saw light at the end of the tunnel!

Early the next morning I was already in my workshop. As if on purpose, the head accountant was running late. Time seemed to drag endlessly. She finally arrived and – o miracle of miracles – she brought from the upper shelves of the accounting storage space and placed on the desk before me the accurately stapled stacks of receipt papers, which had survived in the archives against all the odds. Next to them she placed similar stacks of waybills, which had also grown yellow with age....

From that time on things became easier.

Here was my scenario.

My Armenian friend Edik, or Edik-jan, who purchased the eggs from me, was a man of means, and he was planning to immigrate to the United States, which he actually did in those very years. Before leaving, he was busy selling his artwork, furniture, equipment and his apartment, as many others did at the time. What he later did with that money, nobody knows but him....

But wasn't it possible that my Armenian friend, knowing what a hard time I was having and what difficulties I was experiencing as I was setting up my workshop, occasionally loaned me large amounts, which he was unable to officially transfer to the U.S. anyway. Let us say he was lending me this money in exchange for my promise that I would come to Los-Angeles some day and organize a jewelry workshop there!!!

It was a possible scenario.

But how could I “launder” this borrowed money and turn into “non-cash”? I could do it only in two ways. I could either increase the company's authorized capital every month or bring these funds to my cashier as earnings. But what were these earnings for? For the

sale of those very Easter egg lockets, boxes of which I delivered to Moscow once a month.

This was all fine and dandy. But did I, the president of my company, have the right to be simultaneously the purchaser of the company's own merchandise? I certainly could. Why not? Who could deny the director of Mercedes-Benz the right to purchase a Mercedes? No one. The same goes true for me....

From here the scenario became even more transparent, and this is what it looked like:

I borrowed money from a friend based on our own personal agreement, which had nothing to do with the tax police and then brought it to the company's cashier as earnings. At the same time, I took the "purchased" items – the Easter eggs – home with me and placed them in a safe, where they remained until such times that they were needed. Fortunately, our eggs don't spoil or go rotten. As proof of these purchases, the accounting department of my company keeps original documents confirming the above transactions, receipt papers and waybills. I immediately made copies of all these documents and hid the originals safely.

This was the ace in my sleeve....

The second part of this farce with tragic overtones was to take place at the Europa Hotel.

You probably remember the part of my story, when I spoke about the Swiss director asking us to show our Easter eggs to his friends who were visiting him during Christmas time. You probably recall how successful we were in selling them and how later, we rented a room on the mezzanine floor, and continued to sell our merchandise with success for nearly a year and a half? So here is the scenario.

According to it, we were selling those very same Easter egg lockets, which remained in my home safe until such times that they were needed, and which didn't spoil or go rotten!

I got out my calculator.

My calculations indicated that according to the current exchange rate, the "earnings from the sales" which I handed over to the company's cashier, amounted to a very substantial amount in dollars, quite commensurate with the sum total with six zeros, which the tax police inspectors showed me proudly during our first meeting. The logical conclusion is that when I was selling the eggs, which belonged to me personally, at the Europa Hotel, I was also the sole owner of the profit received. As a matter of fact it was not president of the company by the name of Ananov, but Mr. Ananov as a private person who signed the agreement with the hotel management. And nobody else but I, private citizen Ananov,

and not Ananov the company president, was the owner of the earnings, which I received on a regular monthly basis at the hotel, signing for them in the expense log.

And if that was the case, the tax police, whose responsibility it was to investigate the bad financial practices of companies, that is, legal persons, had no business getting involved in the entrepreneurial activities of a private citizen, in this particular case, Mr. Ananov. This was already within the preview of the income tax inspection, which dealt with transgressions by individuals, not tax police. But this, this was quite another story, and this could be dealt with later ... we'll have to think about it....

I started to smile again. Occasionally. Every time I remembered about the ace in my sleeve....



Larissa and I had two little daughters. And the children started to play a more and more significant role in my life. I no longer felt complete without them, whether or not I saw them frequently. I was a workaholic, for the most part leaving for work when they were still fast asleep and frequently returning when they were already in bed for the night. I often left with exhibitions of my works and then only heard their voices over the phone. But the mere knowledge that somewhere, even if far away, there was a place where my three girls (because I related to Larissa more as if she were my oldest, most unruly daughter, not my wife) were breathing peacefully in their sleep, put my mind at ease and relieved my worries.

These were perilous times in Russia. Armed robbery and racketeering were rampant. In the evening the city looked completely dead. We were afraid to let the children out of the house. My beautiful young wife stayed home all the time. And then it occurred to me:

“I have the opportunity to send my family to Paris for a while. Of course it will be hard for me to be without them, since I won't be able to fly to Paris often. But I would never forgive myself if something bad happened to the children, and I could have prevented it but didn't.”

So I made up my mind. My family left for Paris. The girls learned French at school. Larissa learned it through independent study. They walked freely along the clean streets of a beautiful city. Larissa drove the children to school every day in the white Mercedes I gave her as a present on her thirtieth birthday. The men in the streets turned their heads to gaze at the charming, well-dressed Russian woman and her two lovely daughters. They visited the Louvre together and toured the country on weekends, staying in tidy, inexpensive French hotels. I visited them when I could, and we all flew to Switzerland together to ski. When I was not there, my wife and daughters frequently spent time at the country club, swimming, playing tennis, staying for dinner and going to the movies. Or else they went to the Boulon forest. Once they found a large egg there and brought it to St. Petersburg, where a peacock hatched out of it. The peacock is now living at the zoo.

Larissa and the girls spent five years in Paris. During those years I was very busy working, and had accomplished a lot. But I never wanted my children to become immigrants. And the time came for my family to return home, to Russia. Because it was important for my daughters to remember that there are other things in the world apart from the Boulon forest, such as the village not far from Pskov, where we have our country house built by my dad. It was important for my girls to spend the best years of their childhood next to their dad, together with their whole family, in their home in the Petrograd neighborhood.

The wild period of accumulation of initial capital was over in Russia. Life entered a more peaceful stage.



In the late nineteen eighties, shortly after I opened my workshop, I unexpectedly met producer Nikita Mikhalkov. We hadn't seen each other for years, since the time when, as children we played together at the Nikolina Hill not far Moscow, in an exclusive little village, where his dad, a famous writer, and other public figures had their country villas. My uncle too had a country house in this area, and we used to spend the summer there. I remember that Nikita's dad, Sergei Mikhalkov, had written the play "Sombrero" at that time, and Nikita made all the children green with envy, when he strutted proudly in a cowboy suit, with a sombrero on his head and a toy "Colt" tucked under his belt....

A lot of water had flown under the bridge since that time. Nikita got a diploma from the VGIK Film Institute and became a film producer, and I got a diploma from the LGITM Theater Institute and became a theater producer. We sometimes bumped into each other at producer conferences and festivals, but I never approached him, feeling embarrassed. Nikita was a celebrity, important-looking, extremely intelligent and a fantastic speaker. I didn't feel comfortable reminding him about our childhood acquaintance. But when I met him by accident on the mezzanine floor of the self-same Europa Hotel, he suddenly recognized me, and after he saw the jewelry in my little store, he highly praised my work and even pecked me on the cheek. This was the start of our warm friendship, a relationship considerably warmer and closer than anything we had as children.

This happened during one of my flights to Paris, where I went on business and to spend time with my family. For some reason, while there, I called Nikita at the Thee T Studios. The secretary told me that Mikhalkov was out of the country.

"Is he in France by any chance?"

"Yes he is."

"In Paris?"



“Yes, he is in Paris.”

Several minutes later I was on my way to meet with Nikita, who, as always, was staying at the Royal Monseau Hotel.

Nikita had brought his new film "Burnt by the Sun" to Paris and was getting ready for its grand opening, speaking at press conferences preceding the film's premiere on Champs Elysees. But, nevertheless, he managed to take a day off, and we decided to fly to Monte-Carlo, where he had never been before, to play the roulette. He was planning to drive to Provence after that, where he had another engagement with journalists, and I was going to fly back to Paris.

However, it so happened that I flew to Monte-Carlo alone a day earlier. Nikita had to postpone the trip because of urgent business, and he was going to join me the next morning.

On that same evening after my arrival I managed to win a considerable amount at the casino, and, quite happy with myself, I told Nikita about it.

I decided to give him an appropriate welcome, as befits a Russian producer, who also happens to be a Leo according to his horoscope, when he is arranging a meeting with another Russian, also a producer, in the most expensive corner of Europe. I rented a white limousine convertible – a Rolls Royce – with a chauffeur in a strict black suite, white shirt and tie, and a driver's cap. The Rolls Royce was there, waiting for us at the hotel entrance precisely at the appointed time.



I have to admit in all honesty that there is actually no place to drive to in Monte-Carlo, particularly not in a Rolls Royce. Well, you could probably drive to the Palace of Prince Rainier III if you wished, or to the beach, though you could just as easily get there on foot in no more than ten minutes.... But I wanted to do something special for my friend.

Nikita arrived in the morning, and we settled down together in my three room deluxe suite paid for by the casino (which, incidentally, took care of all my expenses, including dinner, hotel and everything else with the exception if international calls and the mini bar). After unpacking he had a sip of whisky and I had my cup of coffee, after which we decided to go to the beach.

As soon as we walked out of the hotel door, the limousine quietly and smoothly pulled up by the steps. I opened the door casually and let Nikita get in before me. He acted cool, taking it in stride and making himself comfortable, as if it couldn't be otherwise. It was as though all our lives we had been used to driving to the beach in a Rolls Royce. Yes, he and I were very much alike, which probably explains why we became so close in those days, and also why we parted ways later.... But whatever the case may be, I will never forget how much he had helped me then....

During one of our evening conversations, I told Nikita about my tax problems. He thought for a second and then said:

“You should write a letter to Boris Yeltsyn. Personally. I will give it to him at the very first reception in the Kremlin.”

I wrote the letter right there, on the desk of the deluxe suite in Monte-Carlo, and Nikita took it with him to Paris. The letter had an impact on my state of affairs already two weeks later.

Nikita did what he had promised.

Even though what followed was somewhat different from how it would have been under Brezhnev, when everyone would stand “at attention” after a similar letter, still, two generals arrived in St. Petersburg shortly afterwards, with the special task of clarifying the Ananov case. One of the generals was the chief of the President’s intelligence unit and the other – the chief of the intelligence unit of the Russian tax police.

As the result of their visit, the St. Petersburg tax police received instructions to conduct a serious “counter investigation” of the activities of the company headed by Ananov, and to report the results to the generals directly.

The auditors meant business and “set up camp” at our company quarters for a long time. They ate at the free cafeteria for employees. From morning till night we could hear them turning the pages of accounting logs. The rustling of papers and bills never seemed to stop. But the company’s chief accountant was so impeccable in the way she kept her books that six months later, having found no violations, the auditors begged her:

“Give us something, let it be the smallest error.... We will get fired if we come empty-handed. They’ll say we didn’t earn our keep....”

“Shall we give them something,” my accountant asked me.

“No way,” I replied.

I was saved by my love for my trade, our company’s flawless accounting, the accurately stapled and preserved receipts and waybills – “the ace in my sleeve” – and my willingness to take the risk, when the stakes were so high: freedom or jail. And if I won, I could continue my work.

My company is alive and well. We will soon celebrate its fifteenth anniversary. Thank you, Nikita Mikhalkov, for what you did for me....

## MEN'S GAMES

There are a number of issues in life about which men and women will never agree. One such issue is unfaithfulness.

A woman will never (or very rarely) understand the psychology of a regular guy, whom nature created in such a way that he can love one woman and spend the night with another, and he will not consider this to be an act of unfaithfulness.... He will call it a physical exercise, a good way to unwind, a folly at the worst, but definitely not unfaithfulness.... Being unfaithful is when a woman gives herself to another... Because we men take, and they give themselves away.... And what's more, even if we men want to think that it is we who choose our women, in reality it is the woman who selects a man and then gives him a barely noticeable sign of encouragement.... Only after that we demonstrate our male initiative....

There are some intelligent or, rather, wise women in the world who understand this and put up with it.... And it is to them that men return after sowing wild oats, and they treasure these women even more for this understanding. They also love them, and never for a moment stopped loving them.... There, with those other women, they often didn't even want to know their names....

Gambling is another such issue....

In the early nineteen nineties I found myself in Monte-Carlo for the first time and became hooked on the roulette. During the first couple of years I had fantastic luck. I rarely left the casino without having won something, and if I didn't I had the strangest feeling that there was something wrong with the cashier.... I enjoyed not so much the money I won, as the image of the adventurous Russian gambler, who gambles large amounts and takes risks. In other words, who gambles Russian style.... I reveled in the looks of hatred, which I got from those affluent capitalists – failures who were genetically incapable of winning a high stake and taking real risk....

But one day my lucky streak came to an end. The casino punished me severely for my self-conceit, my bragging and lack of caution....



My birthday was coming up, and Larissa and I decided to celebrate it in Monaco, just the two of us, so that I could relax for the first time and not think about exhibitions and business meetings. There I could go to the beach wearing shorts, instead of sweating in a shirt and tie at business negotiations. In other words, we had grandiose plans. After

Monte-Carlo we had made reservations at the Biblos Hotel in Saint-Tropez, which was about an hour's drive in the very same Mercedes that I had won here several years before.

We arrived in Monaco on August 5<sup>th</sup>.

The casino offered me a line of credit in addition to paying for all my hotel expenses. There wasn't much I really had to do – merely to win and leave while fortune smiled at me.... But stopping before it's too late is precisely the most difficult thing in this harsh sports contest....

The credit was given in the form of an empty bank check with a signature, and if the gambler lost while using the credit, the check was sent to the bank. It was then the bank's responsibility to pay the amount owed. Even if the client doesn't have a sufficient balance on his account to cover the loss, the bank will make the required payment anyway, but if this happens, the client will lose credibility forever. If such a client fails to repay his debt to the bank within a month, he will lose access to the European banking network for good.

At that point, my business affairs were not in a very good shape. I couldn't use the credit line because the balance on my account wasn't high enough to guarantee it. But I brought with me a certain amount of cash and intended to use it to gamble. Whatever the case may be.... If I won – good, if I lost – so be it.

The first evening I won an amount substantially greater than my original cash. I left the casino feeling as if I were on seventh heaven.

"That's all," I thought, "I don't owe it to anyone to come back, this is not my job. God sent me a birthday present, and I won't gamble anymore. We will spend time on the beach, go out for dinner, get some sleep, celebrate my birthday and then go to Saint Tropez."

The next day we did indeed go the beach and go out for lunch and for dinner. We were both in high spirits. In an instant I had greatly improved my business affairs. Before leaving France I could now afford buying some gold and diamonds for the workshop and even had enough money left over to pay my staff's August salary. I was genuinely happy. This lasted two days. On the third day I said to myself:

"I don't have to place high stakes. What if I just go and play for pleasure, making small, fifty franc bets?"

So I took a small amount of cash and went to the casino....

What followed was very simple. I lost the “small amount” and wasn’t really upset, since I still had quite a lot left in my suite. So I went back for “a little more”.... Little by little I lost everything I had won. Infuriated by my own stupidity I lost all the money I brought with me, and, totally enraged by my losing, I finally did something I should have never done – I started using my credit line.

And I lost.

When I returned to my suite, Larissa instantly understood what had happened. Of course, now she too was upset. I remained alone the whole night with my bitter thoughts and my grief ....

First of all, I was ashamed to have acted so foolishly with the money that had been sent to me from above – it was like a birthday gift from the skies sent by my long deceased parents. Secondly, a heated discussion and disgrace now awaited me at the bank. It was unheard of: a successful businessman, the president of a jewelry firm, turned out to be insolvent, and what’s more, a gambler.... Thirdly, our entire plans for a vacation and a trip to Saint Tropez, and what remained of our time in Monaco – all this went to the dogs. I now had to return to St. Petersburg at once and try to make as much money as I could to repay my debt to the bank.

I tossed and turned in bed the whole night.

By morning I had a plan.



“Larissa, just listen to me! Remember how I had lost in the past, but easily recovered the amount, using whatever little money I had left. Let’s give it another try! So what if I lose a little more – it won’t change anything anyway. But if I win it back...? All our problems will be resolved! Let’s just go to the beach, calm down, have lunch, and in the evening we will dress up in our best, go to the casino together and give it another try.... What do you say? Let’s do it!”

It took me quite a while to convince Larissa, but I did at the end. We went to the casino together, and I received an additional amount in credit, besides the amount I had already borrowed and lost. Actually, I never doubted they would extend it to me....

....I came up to the gambling table. The game had already started.

I knew that if I came here to win a large amount, my stakes had to be high and I had to take risks. Small stakes and cowardice would definitely not help me win. The only thing it could do was delay my losing.

But still, I couldn't for the life of me exchange the large counter, which I had received in the credit department, for smaller chips, which would have given me ten of them in total. I couldn't do it though I knew that betting with such large chips, if I was lucky, could allow me to win everything I had lost in two-three shots....

I started to play cautiously "in my mind", without bidding. And I started winning. This made me angrier still. With sweaty and trembling hands, I finally forced myself to exchange the counter – not for large chips as I should have done, but for chips one-fifth the value....

What followed next was totally ridiculous.... For instance, having placed five chips on the number "eight" – a thousand franks on the center and in the corners – a "carre", I suddenly changed my mind when the ball was already rolling, and moved the chips to "five", since I decided that this was going to be the winning number.

As you have probably guessed the winning number was "eight"....

This torture continued for at least an hour. During all this time Larissa was standing right next to me and she was making all the right guesses, as she played "in her mind"... My suffering finally ended after I won thirty-five thousand.

Holding the chips, which I had just won in my hand, I came up to another gambling table. A "twenty" had just come up, and the croupier set the ball rolling once again.

"I'll place thirty thousand on number one, right next to the twenty, and use the remaining five thousand to sustain the sector. If my fortune smiles at me, I'll win everything I had lost in one bid," I thought to myself as I reached out for the green square with the number "one" on it. But at the last moment my nerves gave in. I hesitated and it was enough for me to miss the bet.

The ball rolled along the wheel with a clanging noise, as it jumped from one number to another. Finally it stopped rolling.

The devil winked at me cunningly and grinned.

The winning number was "one".

"Let's go," I said to my wife.

We walked out of the casino. I was shaking all over. Without saying a word, I returned my unused additional credit and dragged my feet to the hotel. This was the end. I had no more strength left. I was defeated.

I was unable to come anywhere near that cursed place on the Casino Square in Monte-Carlo for at least a year. And when I did get the courage to go back and try playing a couple more times, I never again experienced this thrill-seeking fearlessness that I had felt in those past, more fortunate times, and I always lost. I now lost calmly, despondently and with a sense of doom....

*Flight London-Jamaica  
Year 2002*

## THE EPILOGUE

Once, a very long time ago, so long ago that it makes me sad to even think about it, I had a Zhiguli car purchased with a power of attorney. My fellow countrymen know very well what a power of attorney means, but for those of you from other lands who are not familiar with the term in its Russian interpretation, I will explain that it is when you have the money to buy a car, but cars are not easily available and you would have had to wait “in line” for years before you could actually purchase it. People signed up and then came to a certain location once a month to confirm their intention and make sure they were still on the list. They waited “in line” for cars just like they did for salami, sugar, flower and other goods that were always in short supply.

So once again, you have the money to buy a car, but cars are not easily available, and you can’t actually purchase it. But then there is this other Soviet individual who has a totally opposite situation. It is his turn “in the line”, but he doesn’t have the money. So what does he do? He purchases a car with your money and gives you a power of attorney. For one full year. You drove his car and once a year you went to a notary public and prolonged the power of attorney.

...So we were sitting in line, waiting for our turn to see a notary public. “The owner” of my car, let us call him Mr. K , was a little tipsy and terribly talkative. He was quite excited in anticipation of another payment, which he was going to receive for giving his power of attorney. He was never a quiet man, but now his chattiness became quite irritating. But what could be expected from a poor, good-for-nothing Soviet engineer who has not interests except for drinking and playing billiards. All he has is a miserable salary and a tiny patch of land in the countryside. Nobody at work has any respect for him; at home his freckled, skinny and bad-tempered wife hits him with a broom; when he buys beer at a beer counter he always raises a big fuss because he feels his glass hasn’t been filled to the brim and because he thinks the beer has too much foam; and finally, his socks stink so badly that one might think that he had inherited them from his grandfather.

Mr. K’s eloquent speech, interspersed with French words and names of French authors, was addressed to a lady in a simple black dress, who was sitting right next to him and his stinking feet.

The lady was probably around thirty, and she sat there quietly, with a shadow of sadness and sorrow once in a while appearing in her eyes.

I knew that people come to a notary public not only when they need a power of attorney for a car, or want to notarize a certificate or make a copy of their diploma. People also come here to receive a death certificate.

I came here for that purpose more than once, and it seemed to me now that the young woman was here for the same reason.

I wanted somehow to stop Mr. K's never ending and awkward monologue and to overcome the embarrassment caused by his lack of sensitivity, so I used an opportune moment to say, with a kind smile:

“There were many happy moments in my life, but there was also a lot of grief... I sat once and thought: What would I want to change if I could start my live over again? And after some pondering I realized that I didn't want to change anything...”

With a look of gratitude and a hint of a smile in her eyes, the lady answered, after a pause:

“I don't want to change anything either... But I would have wanted to remember more...”

It was much, much later that I was able to fully understand how true her words were.



I remember how I was once blissfully happy. Here is how it happened.

I was sitting at the wheel of the “coolest” Soviet car of these years, a navy-colored, six-cylinder “Volga”. This was considered the most fashionable color, which earned the car the nickname of “ink blob”. It was early on a warm spring evening. The huge red circle of the sun hung above my head, but its light wasn't blinding. The highway on the outskirts of Leningrad was wide and empty. I was young, well dressed, self-confident and with money in my pocket. I was alone in the car, driving without any purpose somewhere in the direction of the Baltic states. I was in no hurry to get anywhere, and no one was expecting me. I was free as the wind. I never went looking for anyone but I was always open to the possibility that right now, behind the turn in the road, I will see a slim silhouette on the side of the road. The young woman will hold her arm in the air hoping for a ride. I will stop, ask her to get in the car, and we will drive very far, to the soft sounds of music. We will drive silently on, afraid to look at each other, and it will start raining. We will feel warm and cozy inside the car, and we will drive on and on,



understanding that we are finally experiencing the greatest, absolutely the best thing that can happen to us...

And I already felt myself a happy man because I knew that this encounter was inevitable.

It happened, a very long time ago, only once in my life, but it did happen.

At that time I was working at the drama theater in Pskov. I was staging a play for the theater, and I traveled frequently back and forth to Leningrad.

I knew the highway in and out, I knew every bump in the road. Our country house was located right between Pskov and Leningrad, along the same highway.

It happened on the morning of November 8, which was a state holiday, just as I had expected it to happen, on the highway, about thirty miles outside the city.

I stopped, she opened the door and got in. She sat down on the seat next to mine. She didn't say a word. She never asked where I was going.

We were both silent. Music was playing quietly. The sun was lighting our path, without blinding us. I was young. I was free. I was happy and I did not say anything, afraid to scare her away or to wake up. We drove on for a long time. Suddenly she shuddered, sobbed like a seagull and waved her hand. It was a mystery. She was pointing to a road, which brought us directly to our country house that was less the half a mile away.

We walked into the house in silence. I heated the stove, and she sat and watched me.

I don't remember how the day went by and evening descended. When we were already in the car, on the way back, I could stand it no longer and begged her:

"I am on the way to Pskov, to the theater there. I am a producer. I am thirty years old. I have been waiting for you alone. Waiting for a very long time. Don't go away. Come with me."

With a hint of a smile in her eyes, she shook her head.

We drove on in silence, until she whispered:

"Please let me out here."

She gave me a long look, the disquieting look of a wounded bird, and then she got out of the car. It was as if she had fled away.



God punished me. I was not free at that time, the scoundrel. I was married to a lovely girl with enormous, bushy eyelashes and kind eyes. She was loyal and honest. She was also modest and head over heels in love with me. She was a slim brunette with the cosmic name of Stella.

We spent a long time together; for thirteen whole years we shared our joys and sorrows; I tortured her, drank heavily and was unfaithful to her. I also loved her and was her very best friend.

She suffered, dragged me out of my deadliest drinking sprees and fed me with chicken broth. Together, we buried my father and then our baby who died in childbirth; later I carried her dad to the morgue literally on my back. He was a loyal and honest man, just like her. Then I took her mom, who was kind like the mother hen, to the hospital, and shortly afterwards we buried her too. Then we lived, just the two of us, sharing our grief half-and-half, and supporting each other. But then I left her.

She could not start hating me: her love helped her forgive me. She remained my friend, just as she had always been.

Many years later, she told me:

“Don’t blame yourself, Andrei. You were always right about everything. I am grateful to you for everything.”

To this day I can’t understand what kind of cross I have been carrying all my life, what is it that I wanted. I went away, I slept with other women and missed her, I bought her gifts and longed to see her, but then once again my destiny carried me away.

And then again I yearned for her. I was in a hurry to see her. She was happy when I was with her, and for some reason I didn’t feel ashamed of myself. Probably God would have punished me severely a long time ago. But she, she forgave me.

Forgive me, Stella. Perhaps I am not an absolute scoundrel, if God rewarded me with my two lovely daughters, Anya and Nastya.



More and more I feel as if I am writing this book as a confession before being put to death. As soon as I am finished, I will die.

One famous writer has such a novella:

...A man was lying next to the window, dying. It was late autumn. The trees were shedding their leaves, and when only three leaves remained on the branch in front of the window, the man said to himself:

“When the last leaf is gone, I will die.”

Every morning, after he woke up, he looked into the window. Soon another leaf was gone, and now only two remained on the branch. Then one. Next morning it should have been gone as well.

In the morning the man opened his eyes and saw that the leaf was still on the branch. “I will live another day,” the dying man thought. Next day the leaf was hanging even lower from the branch, closer to the window. But it was still there. This went on for several days, then a week, and then the man began to feel better, and he finally recovered completely.

When came up to the window, everything became clear to him.

Both the branch and the leaf were a picture drawn by a loving hand.

This book is being translated into French by an old friend of my father’s – the only one who remains on that branch, my dad’s friend since childhood, Yuri Mikhailovich Krasovsky, a most charming, subtle and elegant gray-haired gentleman.

Once, when he was giving me the latest chapter he had been working on, he said with a smile:

“I’ll finish working on the last chapter, Andrei, and then I’ll die.”

And every time he brings me the completed translation of a chapter, I give him a new one.

But I fear that one day I will not have enough talent to go on.

*May 2, 1998  
Flight St. Petersburg – Paris*