

Stalin's Teardrops

by Ian Watson, 1943–

Published: 1991
in »Salvage Rites«

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Part I

The Lie of the Land.

„This is the era of *clarity* now, Valentin,“ Mirov reproved me. „I don't necessarily like it, but I am no traitor. I have problems, you have problems. We must adapt.“

I chuckled and then said, „In this office we have always adapted, haven't we?“

By „office“ I referred to the whole cluster of studios which composed the department of cartography. Ten in all, these were interconnected by archways rather than doors so that my staff and I could pass freely from one to the next across a continuous sweep of parquet flooring. In recent years I had resisted the general tendency to subdivide spacious rooms which, prior to the Revolution, had been the province of a giant insurance company. For our drawing tables and extra-wide filing cabinets we needed elbow-room. We needed as much daylight as possible from our windows overlooking the courtyard deep below. Hence our location here on the eighth floor; hence the absence of steel bars at our windows, and ours alone. Grids of shadow must not fall across our work.

On hot summer days when breezes blew in and out we needed to be specially vigilant. (And of course we used much sealing wax every evening when we locked up.) In winter, the standard lighting—those big white globes topped by shades—was perfectly adequate. Still, their illumination could not rival pure daylight. We often left the finalization of important maps until the summer months.

Mirov's comments about clarity seemed spurious in the circumstances; though with a sinking heart I knew all too well what he meant.

„We have lost touch with our own country,“ he said forlornly, echoing a decision which had been handed down from on high.

„Of course we have,“ I agreed. „That was the whole idea, wasn't it?“

„This must change.“ He permitted himself a wry joke. „The lie of the land must be corrected.“

Mirov was a stout sixty-five-year-old with short grizzled hair resembling the hachuring on a map of a steep round hillock. His nose and cheeks were broken-veined from over-indulgence in the now-forbidden spirit. I think he resented never having been attached to one of the more glamorous branches of our secret police. Maybe he had always been bored by his job, unlike me.

Some people might view the task of censorship as a cushy sinecure. Not so! It demanded a logical meticulousness which in essence was more creative than pedantic. Yet it was, well, dusty. Mirov lacked the inner forcefulness which might have seen him assigned to foreign espionage or even to the border guards. I could tell that he did not intend to resist the changes which were now in the air, like some mischievous whirlwind intent on tossing us all aloft. He hadn't come here to conspire with me, to any great extent.

As head of censorship Mirov was inspector of the department of cartography. Yet under my guidance of the past twenty years cartography basically ran itself. Mirov routinely gave his imprimatur to our products: the regional and city maps, the charts, the Great Atlas. Two years his junior, I was trusted. The

occasional spy whom he planted on me as a trainee invariably must deliver a glowing report. (Which of my staff of seventy persons, busily drafting away or practising, was the current „eye of Mirov“? I didn't give a hoot.) As to the quality of our work, who was more qualified than myself to check it?

„What you're suggesting isn't easy,“ I grumbled. „Such an enterprise could take years, even decades. I was hoping to retire by the age of seventy. Are you implying that I stay on and on forever?“ I knew well where I would retire to...

He rubbed his nose. Did those broken capillaries itch so much?

„Actually, Valentin, there's a time limit. Within two years—consisting of twenty-four months, not of twenty-nine months or thirty-two; and this is regarded as generous—we must publish a true Great Atlas. Otherwise the new economic plan... well, they're thinking of new railway lines, new dams, new towns, opening up wasteland for oil and mineral exploitation.“

„Two years?“ I had to laugh. „It's impossible, quite impossible.“

„It's an order. Any procrastination will be punished. You'll be dismissed. Your pension rights will diminish: no cabin in the countryside, no more access to hard-currency shops. A younger officer will replace you—one of the new breed. Don't imagine, Valentin, that you will have a companion in misfortune! Don't assume that I too shall be dismissed at the summit of my career. My other bureaus are rushing to publish and promote all sorts of forbidden rubbish. So-called experimental poetry, fiction, art criticism. Plays will be staged to shock us, new music will jar the ears, new art will offend the eye. Happenings will happen. Manuscripts are filed away under lock and key, after all—every last item. We only need to unlock those cupboards, to let the contents spill out and lead society astray into mental anarchy.“

I sympathised. „Ah, what we have come to!“

He inclined his cross-hatched hill-top head.

„*You, Valentin, you.* What you have come to.“ He sighed deeply. „Still, I know what you mean... Colonel.“

He mentioned my rank to remind me. We might wear sober dark suits, he and I, but we were both ranking officers.

„With respect, General, these—ah—orders are practically impossible to carry out.“

„Which is why a new deputy-chief cartographer has been assigned to you.“

„So here is the younger officer you mentioned-already!“

He gripped my elbow in the manner of an accomplice, though he wasn't really such.

„It shows willing,“ he whispered, „and it's one way out. Let the blame fall on her if possible. Let her seem a saboteur.“ Aloud, he continued, „Come along with me to the restaurant, to meet Grusha. You can bring her back here yourself.“

I should meet my nemesis on neutral territory, as it were. Thus Mirov avoided direct, visible responsibility for introducing her.

Up here on the eighth floor we in cartography had the advantage of being close to one of the two giant restaurants which fed the thousands of men and women employed in the various branches of secret police work. The other restaurant was down in the basement. Many staff routinely turned up at eight o'clock of a morning—a full hour earlier than the working day commenced—to take advantage of hearty breakfasts unavailable outside: fresh milk, bacon and eggs, sausages, fresh fruit.

As I walked in silence with Mirov for a few hundred metres along the lime-green corridor beneath the omnipresent light-globes, I reflected that proximity to the restaurant was less advantageous today.

At this middle hour of the morning the food hall was almost deserted but for cooks and skivvies. Mirov drank the excellent coffee and cream with almost indecent haste so as to leave me alone with the woman. Grusha was nudging forty but hadn't lost her figure. She was willowy, with short curly fair hair, a large equine nose, and piercing sapphire eyes. A nose for sniffing out delays, eyes for seeing through excuses. An impatient thoroughbred! An intellectual. The privileged daughter of someone inclined to foreign and new ways. Daddy was one of the new breed who had caused so much upset. Daddy had used influence to place her here. This was her great opportunity; and his.

„So you were originally a graduate of the Geographical Academy,“ I mused.

She smiled lavishly. „Do I take it that I shall find your ways a little different, Colonel?“

„Valentin, please.“

„We must mend those ways. I believe there is much to rectify.“

„Are you married, Grusha?“

„To our land, to the future, to my specialty.“

„Which was, precisely?“

„The placing of names on maps. I assume you know Imhof's paper, *Die Anordnung der Namen in der Karte!*“

„You read German?“

She nodded. „French and English too.“

„My word!“

„I used my language skills on six years' duty in the DDR.“ Doing what? Ah, not for me to enquire.

Her shoulders were narrow. How much weight could they bear? Every so often she would hitch those shoulders carelessly with the air of an energetic filly frustrated, till now, at not being given free rein to dash forth—along a prescribed, exactly measured track. There lay the rub. Let her try to race into the ambiguous areas I had introduced!

I covered a yawn with my palm. „Yes, I know the Kraut's work. He gave me some good ideas. Oh, there are so many means for making a map hard to read. Nay, not merely misleading but incomprehensible!

„Names play a vital role. Switch them all around, till only the contour lines are the same as before. Interlace them, so that new place names seem to emerge spontaneously. Set them all askew, so that the user needs to turn the map around constantly till his head is in a spin. Space the names out widely so that the map seems dotted with unrelated letters like some code or acrostic. Include too many names, so that the map chokes with surplus data.“

Grusha stared at me, wide-eyed.

„And that,“ I said, „is only the icing on the cake.“

Back in cartography I gave her a tour of the whole cake. In line with the policy of clarity I intended to be transparently clear.

„Meet Andrey!“ I announced in the first studio. „Andrey is our expert with flexible curves and quills.“

Red-headed, pock-marked Andrey glanced up from his glass drawing table, floodlit from below. Lead weights covered in baize held sheets of tracing paper in position. A trainee, Goldman, sat nearby carving quills for Andrey's later

inspection. At Goldman's feet a basket was stuffed with an assortment of wing feathers from geese, turkeys, ducks, and crows.

„Goose quills are supplest and wear longest,“ I informed Grusha, though she probably knew. „Turkeys' are stiffer. Duck and crow is for very fine work. The choice of a wrong quill easily exaggerates a pathway into a major road or shrinks a river into a stream. Observe how fluidly Andrey alters the contours of this lake on each new tracing.“

Andrey smiled in a preoccupied way. „This new brand of tracing paper cockles nicely when you block in lakes of ink.“

„Of course, being rag-based,“ I added, „it expands on damp days by, oh, a good two percent. A trivial distortion, but it all helps.“

The second studio was the scale room, where Zorov and assistants worked with camera lucida and other tricks at warping the scales of maps.

„En route to a final map we enlarge and reduce quite a lot,“ I explained. „Reduction causes blurring. Enlargement exaggerates inaccuracies. This prism we're using today both distorts and enlarges. Now here,“ I went on, leading her to Frenzel's table, „we're reducing and enlarging successively by the similar-triangles method.“

„I do recognize the technique,“ answered Grusha, a shade frostily.

„Ah, but we do something else with it. Here is a road. We shrink a ten-kilometre stretch to the size of one kilometre. We stretch the next one kilometre to the length of ten. Then we link strand after strand back together. So the final length is identical, but all the bends are in different places. See how Antipin over here is inking rivers red and railway tracks blue, contrary to expectation.“

Antipin's trainee was filling little bottles of ink from a large bottle; the stuff dries up quickly.

Onward to the blue studio, the photographic room where Papyrin was shading sections of a map in light blue.

„Naturally, Grusha, light blue doesn't photograph, so on the final printed map these parts will be blank. The map, in this case, is correct yet cannot be reproduced—“

Onward to the dot and stipple studio... Remarkable what spurious patterns the human eye can read into a well-placed array of dots.

All of this, even so, was only really the icing...

Grusha flicked her shoulders again. „It's quite appalling, Colonel Valentin. Well, I suppose we must simply go back to the original maps and use those for the Atlas.“

„What original maps?“ I enquired. „Who knows any longer which are the originals? Who has known for years?“

„Surely they are on file!“

„All of our maps are in a constant state of revolutionary transformation, don't you see?“

„You're mocking.“

„It wouldn't be very pure to keep those so-called originals from a time of exploitation and inequality, would it?“ I allowed myself a fleeting smile. „Nowadays all of our maps are originals. A mere two percent change in each successive edition amounts to a substantial shift over the course of a few decades. Certain constants remain, to be sure. A lake is still a lake, but of what size and shape? A road still stretches from the top of a map to its bottom; yet by what route, and through what terrain? Security is important, Grusha. I

suppose by the law of averages we might have returned to our original starting point in a few cases, though frankly I doubt it.“

„Let us base our work on the first published Atlas, then! The least altered one.“

„Ah, but Atlases are withdrawn and pulped. As to archive copies, have you never noticed that the published products are not dated? Intentionally so!“

„I must sit down and think.“

„Please do, please do! I’m anxious that we co-operate. Only tell me how.“

My studios hummed with cartographic activity.

Finding one’s way to our gray stone edifice in Dzerzhinsky Square only posed a serious problem to anyone who paid exact heed to the city map; and which old city hand would be so naive? We all knew on the gut level how to interpret such maps, how to transpose districts around, and permute street names, how to unkink what was kinked and enlarge what was dwarfed. We had developed a genius for interpretation possessed by no other nation, an instinct which must apply anywhere throughout the land. Thus long-distance truck drivers reached their destinations eventually. The army manoeuvred without getting seriously lost. New factories found reasonable sites, obtained their raw materials, and dispatched boots or shovels or whatever with tolerable efficiency.

No foreigner could match our capacity; and we joked that diplomats in our capital were restricted to line of sight or else were like Theseus in the labyrinth, relying on a long thread whereby to retrace their footsteps. No invader would ever broach our heartland. As to spies, they were here, yes; but where was here in relation to anywhere else?

Heading home of an evening from Dzerzhinsky Square was another matter however. For me, it was! I could take either of two entirely separate routes. One led to the flat where tubby old Olga, my wife of these last thirty years, awaited me. The other way led to my sleek mistress, Koshka.

Troubled by the events of the day, I took that second route. I hadn’t gone far before I realized that my new assistant was following me. She slipped along the street from doorway to doorway.

Should I hide and accost her, demanding to know what the devil she thought she was doing? Ah no, not yet. Plainly she had her reasons—and other people’s reasons too. I dismissed the speculation that she was another „eye of Mirov“. Mirov had practically dissociated himself from Grusha. She had been set upon me by the new breed, the reformers, so-called. Evidently I spelled a special danger to them. How could they create a new country while I held the key to the old one in my keeping?

I had not intended a confrontation quite so soon; but she was provoking it. So let her find out! I hurried up this prospekt, down that boulevard, through the alley, over the square. Workers hurried by wearing stiff caps. Fat old ladies bustled with bundles. I ducked down a narrow street, through a lane, to another street. Did Grusha realize that her gait was springier? Perhaps not. She had not lost her youthful figure.

At last, rounding a certain corner, I sprinted ahead and darted behind a shuttered kiosk. Waiting, I heard her break into a canter because she feared she had lost me. By now no one else was about. Leaping out, I caught her wrist. She shrieked, afraid of rape or a mugging by a hooligan.

„Who are you?“ she gasped. „What do you want?“

„Look at me, Grusha. I’m Valentin. Don’t you recognize me?“

„You must be... his son!“

„Oh no.“

The distortions wrought by age, the wrinkles, liver spots, crow's feet and pot belly: all these had dropped away from me, just as they always did whenever I took my special route. I had cast off decades. How else could I enjoy and satisfy a mistress such as Koshka?

Grusha had also shed years, becoming a gawky, callow girl—who now clutched my arm now in awkward terror, for I had released her wrist.

„What has happened, Colonel?“

„I can't still be a Colonel, can I? Maybe a simple Captain or Lieutenant.“

„You're *young!*“

„You're very young indeed, a mere fledgling.“

„Was it all done by make-up—I mean, your appearance, back at the Centre? In that case how can the career records...?“

„Ah, so you saw mine?“ Despite the failing light I could have sworn that she blushed. „Make-up, you say? Yes, *made up!* My country is made up, invented by us map makers. We are the makers of false maps, dear girl; and our national consciousness is honed by this as a pencil is brought to a needle-point against a sand-paper block, as the blade of a mapping pen is sharpened on an oil stone. Dead ground occurs.“

„I know what *dead ground* means. That merely refers to areas you can't see on a relief map from a particular viewpoint.“

„Such as the viewpoint of the State...? Listen to me: if we inflate certain areas, then we shrink others away to a vanishing point. These places can still be found by the map-maker who knows the relation between the false and the real; one who knows the routes. From here to there; from now to then. Do you recognize this street, Grusha? Do you know its name?“

„I can't see a signpost...“

„You still don't understand.“ I drew her towards a shop window, under a street lamp which had now illuminated. „Look at yourself!“

She regarded her late-adolescent self. She pressed her face to the plate glass as though a ghostly shop assistant might be lurking inside, imitating her stance. Then she sprang back, not because she had discovered somebody within but because she had found no one.

„These dead zones,“ she murmured. „You mean the gulags, the places of internal exile...“

„No! I mean places such as this. I'm sure other people than me must have found similar dead zones; and never breathed a word. These places have their own inhabitants, who are recorded on no census.“

„So you're a secret dissident, are you, Valentin?“

I shook my head. „Without the firm foundation of the State-as-it-is—without the lie of the land, as Mirov innocently put it—how could such places continue to exist? That is why we must not destroy the work of decades. This is magical—magical, Grusha! I am young again. My mistress lives here.“

She froze. „So your motives are entirely selfish.“

„I am old, back at the Centre. I've given my life to the State. I deserve... No, you're too ambitious, too eager for stupid troublesome changes. It is you who are selfish at heart. The very best of everything resides in the past. Why read modern mumbo-jumbo when we can read immortal Turgenev or Gogol? I've

suffered... terror. My Koshka and I are both honed in the fires of fear.“ How could I explain that, despite all, those were the best days? The pure days.

„Fear is finished,“ she declared. „Clarity is dawning.“

I could have laughed till I cried.

„What we will lose because of it! How our consciousness will be diminished, diluted, bastardised by foreign poisons. I‘m a patriot, Grusha.“

„A red fascist,“ she sneered, and started to walk away.

„Where are you going?“ I called.

„Back.“

„Can‘t do that, girl. Not so easily. Don‘t know the way. You‘ll traipse round and round.“

„We‘ll see!“ Hitching herself, she marched off.

I headed to Koshka’s flat, where pickles and black caviar sandwiches, cold cuts and mushroom and spirit were waiting; and Koshka herself, and her warm sheets.

Towards midnight, in the stillness I heard faint footsteps outside so I rose and looked down from her window. A slim shadowy form paced wearily along the pavement below, moving out of sight. After a while the figure returned along the opposite pavement, helplessly retracing the same route.

„What is it, Valentin?“ came my mistress’s voice. „Why don‘t you come back to bed?“

„It’s nothing important, my love,“ I said. „Just a street walker, all alone.“

Part II

Into the Other Country.

When Peterkin was a lad, the possibilities for joy seemed limitless. He would become a famous artist. He dreamed of sensual canvases shamelessly ablush with pink flesh, peaches, orchid blooms. Voluptuous models would disrobe for him and sprawl upon a velvet divan. Each would be an appetizing banquet, a feast for the eyes, as teasing to his palate as stimulating of his palette.

Why did he associate naked ladies with platters of gourmet cuisine? Was it because those ladies were spread for consumption? How he had lusted for decent food when he was young. And how he had hungered for the flesh. Here, no doubt, was the origin of the equation between feasting and love.

Peterkin felt no desire to eat human flesh. He never even nibbled his own fingers. The prospect of tooth marks indenting a human body nauseated him. Love-bites were abhorrent. No, he yearned—as it were—to *absorb* a woman’s body. Libido, appetite, and art were one.

Alas for his ambitions, the requirements of the Party had cemented him into a career niche in the secret police building in Dzerzhinsky Square; on the eighth floor, to be precise, in the cartography department.

Not for him a paint brush but all those damnable map projections. Cylindrical, conical, azimuthal. Orthographic, gnomonic. Sinusoidal, polyconic.

Not Matisse, but Mercator.

Not Gauguin but Gall’s Stereographic. Not Modigliani but Interrupted Mollweide.

The would-be artist had mutated into an assistant in this subdivided suite of rooms where false maps were concocted.

„My dreams have decayed,“ he confided to friend Goldman in the restaurant one lunchtime.

Around them, officers from the directorates of cryptography, surveillance, or the border guards ate lustily under rows of fat white light-globes. Each globe wore a hat-like shade. Fifty featureless white heads hung from the ceiling, brooking no shadows below, keeping watch blindly. A couple of baggy babushkas wheeled trolleys stacked with dirty dishes around the hall. Those old women seemed bent on achieving some quota of soiled crockery rather than on delivering the same speedily to the nearest sink.

Goldman speared a slice of roast tongue. „Oh I don't know. Where else, um, can we eat, um, as finely as this?“

Dark, curly-haired, pretty-faced Goldman was developing a hint of a pot-belly. Only a proto-pot as yet, though definitely a protuberance in the making. Peterkin eyed his neighbour's midriff.

Goldman sighed. „Ah, it's the sedentary life! I freely admit it. All day long spent sharpening quills for pens, pens, pens... No sooner do I empty one basket of wing feathers than that wretched hunchback porter delivers another. Small wonder he's a hunchback! I really ought to be out in the woods or the marshes shooting geese and teal and woodcock. That's what I wanted to be, you know? A hunter out in the open air.“

„So you've told me.“ Peterkin was lunching on broiled hazel-hen with jam. However, each evening—rain, snow, or shine—he made sure to take a five-kilometre constitutional walk, armed with a sketchbook as witness to his former hopes; rather as a mother chimp might tote her dead baby around until it started to stink.

Peterkin was handsome where his friend was pretty. Slim, blond, steely-eyed, and with noble features. Yet all for what? Here in the secret police building he mostly met frumps or frigid functionaries. The foxy females were bait for foreign diplomats and businessmen. Out on the streets, whores were garishly painted in a do-it-yourself style: Slash lips, cheeks rouged like stop-lights, bruised eyes. Under the evening street lamps those ladies of the night looked so lurid to Peterkin.

Excellent food a-plenty was on offer to the secret servants of the State such as he. Goose with apples, breaded mutton chops, shashlik on skewers, steamed sturgeon. Yet whereabouts in his life were the soubrettes and odalisques and gorgeous inamoratas? Without whom, how could he really sate himself?

„So how are the, um, projections?“ Goldman asked idly.

„Usual thing, old son. I'm busy using Cassini's method. Distances along the central meridian are true to scale. But all other meridian lines stretch the distances. That makes Cassini's projection fine for big countries that spread from north to south. Of course ours sprawls from east to west. Ha! Across a few thousand kilometres that's quite enough distortion for an enemy missile to miss a silo by kilometres.“

„Those geese and turkeys gave their wings to shelter us! Gratifying to know that I'm carving patriotic pens.“

„I wonder,“ Peterkin murmured, „whether amongst our enemies I have some exact counterpart whose job is to deduce which projections I'm using to distort different areas of land...“

Goldman leaned closer. „I heard a rumour. My boss Andrey was talking to Antipin. Andrey was projecting *the future*. Seems that things are going to change. Seems, for the sake of openness, that we'll be publishing true maps sooner or later.“

Peterkin chuckled. This outlook seemed as absurd as that he himself might ever become a member of the Academy of Arts.

Yet that very same evening Peterkin saw the woman of his desires.

He had stepped out along Krasny Avenue and turned down Zimoy Prospekt to enter the park. It was only early September, so the ice-skating rink was still a lake dotted with ducks: fat quacking boats laden with potential pens, pens, pens. The air was warm, and a lone kiosk sold chocolate ice cream to strollers; one of whom was her.

She was small and pert, with eyes that were brimming china inkwells, irises of darkest brown. Her curly, coal-black hair—not unlike friend Goldman's, in fact—formed a corona of sheer, glossy darkness, a photographic negative of the sun in eclipse; the sun itself being her round, tanned, softly-contoured face. From the moment Peterkin saw her, that woman suggested a sensuality bottled up and distilled within her—the possibility of love, lust, inspiration, nourishment. She was a liqueur of a lady. She was caviar, licking a chocolate cornet.

Her clothes were routine: cheaply styled bootees and an open raincoat revealing a blotchy floral dress. Yet Peterkin felt such a suction towards her, such a powerful current flowing in her direction.

She glanced at him and shrugged with what seemed a mixture of resignation and bitter amusement. So he followed her out of the park, across the Prospekt, into a maze of minor streets which became increasingly unfamiliar.

Some empty stalls stood deserted in a square which must serve as a market place, so he realized that he was beginning to tread „dead ground“, that unacknowledged portion of the city which did not figure on any plans. If inspectors approached by car they would be hard put to find these selfsame streets. One-way and no-entry signs would redirect them away. Such was the essence of this district; impenetrability was the key that locked it up safely out of sight.

Of course, if those same inspectors came on foot with illicit purposes in mind—hoping to buy a kilo of bananas, a rare spare part for a washing machine, or a foreign pornography magazine—they could be in luck. Subsequently they wouldn't be able to report where they had been with any clarity.

The moan of a saxophone assailed Peterkin's ears; a jazz club was nearby. Rowdy laughter issued from a restaurant where the drapes were drawn; he judged that a heavy drinking bout was in progress.

A sign announced *Polnoch Place*. He had never heard of it. How the sky had darkened, as if in passing from street to street he had been forging hour by hour deeper towards midnight. At last the woman halted under a bright street lamp, her ice cream quite consumed, and waited for him, so unlike the ill-painted floozies of more public thoroughfares.

He cleared his throat. „I must apologize for following you in this fashion, but, well—“ Should he mention voluptuous canvases? He flourished his sketchbook lamely.

„What else could you do?“ she asked. „You’re attracted to me magnetically. Our auras resonate. I was aware of it.“

„Our auras—?“

„Our vibrations.“ She stated this as a fact.

„Are you psychic? Are you a medium?“

„A medium? Oh yes, you might say so. Definitely! A conduit, a channel, a guide. How else could you have strayed so far into this territory except in my footsteps?“

Peterkin glanced around him at strange facades.

„I’ve heard it said... Are there really two countries side by side—one where the secret police hold sway, and a whole other land which is simply *secret*? Not just a few little dead zones—but whole swathes of hidden terrain projecting from those zones?“

„Why, of course! When human beings yearn long enough to be some place else, then that somewhere can come into being. Imagine an hourglass; that’s the sort of shape the world has. People can drift through like grains of sand—though only so far. There’s a kind of population pressure that rebuffs intruders. For the second world gives rise to its own geography, but also to its own inhabitants.“

„Has anyone mapped this other terrain?“

„Is that what you do, draw maps?“ Her hair, under the street lamp! Her face, like a lamp itself unto him!

His job was a state secret. Yet this woman couldn’t possibly be an „eye“ of the police, trying to trap him.

„Oh yes, I draw maps,“ he told her.

„Ah, that makes it more difficult for you to come here.“

„Of course not. Don’t you realize? Our maps are all lies! Deliberate lies, distortions. In the department of cartography our main brief is to warp the true shape of our country in all sorts of subtle ways.“

„Ah?“ She sounded unsurprised. „Where I come from, artists map the country with kaleidoscopes of colour. Musicians map it in a symphony. Poets, in a sonnet.“

It came to Peterkin that in this other land he could at last be the painter of his desires. He had never believed in psychic phenomena or in a spirit world (unless, perhaps, it was the world of ninety-proof spirit). Yet this circumstance was different. The woman spoke of a material other world—extending far beyond the dead ground of the city. Peterkin knew that he must possess this woman as the key to all his hopes, the portal to a different existence.

„So do you despise your work?“ she asked him.

„Yes! Yes!“

She smiled invitingly—and wryly, as though he had already disappointed her.

„My name’s Masha.“

Her room was richly furnished with rugs from Central Asia, silverware, onyx statuettes, ivory carvings. Was she some black marketeer in art treasures or the mistress of one? Had he stumbled upon a cache hidden since the Revolution? Curtains were woven through with threads of gold. Matching brocade cloaked the bed in a filigree till she drew back the cover, disclosing silk sheets as blue as the clearest summer sky. Her cheap dress, which she shed without further ado, uncovered sleek creamy satin camiknickers... which she also peeled off carelessly.

„Take fright and run away, Peterkin,“ she teased. „Take fright now!“

„Run away *from you?*“

„That might be best.“

„What should frighten me?“

„You’ll see.“

„I’m seeing!“ Oh her body. Oh his, aquiver, arrow notched and tense to fly into her. He laughed. „I hardly think I’m impotent.“

„Even so.“ She lay back upon the blue silk sheets.

Yet as soon as he started to stroke her limbs...

At first he thought absurdly that Masha had concealed an inflatable device within her person: a dildo-doll made of toughest gossamer so as to fold up as small as a thumb yet expand into a balloon with the dimensions of a man. This, she had liberated and inflated suddenly as a barrier, thrusting Peterkin aside...

What, powered by a cartridge of compressed air? How risky! What if the cartridge sprang a leak or exploded? What if the compressed air blew the wrong way?

The intruder had flowed from Masha in a flood—from her open and inviting legs. It had gushed out cloudily, spilling from her like pints and pints of leaking semen congealing into a body of firm white jelly.

He gagged, in shock. „Wh-what—?“

„It’s ectoplasm,“ she said.

„Ectoplasm—“

Yes, he had heard of ectoplasm: the strange fluidic emanation that supposedly pours out of a psychic’s nostrils or ears or mouth, an amorphous milk that takes on bodily form and a kind of solidity. It came from her vagina.

Pah! Flimflammy! Puffs of smoke and muslin suspended on strings. Soft lighting, a touch of hypnosis and auto-suggestion.

Of course, of course. Went without saying. Except...

What now lay between them could be none other than an ectoplasmic body.

A guard dog lurked in Masha’s kennel.

A eunuch slept at her door. She wore a chastity belt in the shape of a blanched, clinging phantom. Peterkin studied the thing that separated them. He poked it, and it quivered. It adhered to Masha, connected by...

„Don’t try to pull it away,“ she warned. „You can’t. It will only go back inside when my excitement ebbs.“

And still he desired her, perhaps even more so. He ached.

„You’re still excited?“ he asked her.

„Oh yes.“

„Does this... creature... give you any satisfaction?“

„None at all.“

„Did a witch curse you, Masha? Or a magician? Do such persons live in your country?“

Perhaps Masha belonged to somebody powerful who had cast a spell upon her as an insurance policy for those times when she crossed the in-between zone to such places as the park. If composers could map that other land with their concerti, or painters with their palettes, why not other varieties of magic too?

She peered around the white shoulder of the manifestation. „Don’t you see, Peterkin? It’s you. It’s the template for you, the mould.“

What did she mean? He too peered at the smooth suggestion of noble features. His ghost was enjoying—no, certainly not even enjoying!—Masha. His ghost simply intervened, another wretched obstacle to joy. A twitching lump, a body equipped with a nervous system but lacking any mind or thoughts.

„And yet,“ she hinted, „there’s a way to enter my country. A medium is a bridge, a doorway. Not to any spirit-world, oh no. But to: that other existence.“

„Show me the way.“

„Are you quite sure?“

How he ached. „Yes, Masha. Yes. I must enter.“

As his thoughts and memories flowed freely—of old desires, of canvases never painted and bodies never seen, of stuffed dumplings and skewered lamb and interminable cartographic projections—so he sensed a shift in his personal centre of gravity, in his prime meridian.

He felt at once much closer to Masha, and anaesthetized, robbed of sensation.

His body was moving; it was rolling over on the bed, flexing its arms and legs—no longer his own body to command.

Equipped with the map of his memories, the ghost had taken charge.

Now the ghost was making Peterkin’s body stand up and put on his clothes; while he—his kernel, his soul—clung against Masha silently.

That body which had been his was opening and shutting its mouth, uttering noises. Words.

„You go along Polnoch Place—“ Masha gave directions and instructions; Peterkin couldn’t follow them.

He himself was shrinking. Already he was the size of a child. Soon, of a baby. As an Arabian genie dwindles, tapering down in a stream of smoke into a little bottle, so now he was entering Masha.

„I shall be born again, shan’t I?“ he cried out. „Once you’ve smuggled me over the border deep into the other country, inside of you?“

Unfortunately he couldn’t hear so much as a mewling whimper from what little of him remained outside of her.

All he heard, distantly, was a door bang shut as the phantom left Masha’s room.

Warm darkness embraced his dissolved, suspended existence.

Only at the last moment did he appreciate the worries of the persons in that other, free domain—who had been forced into existence by the frustrations of reality and who depended for their vitality upon a lie, which might soon be erased. They, the free, were fighting for the perpetuation of falsehood. Peterkin had been abducted so that a wholly obedient servant might be substituted in his place in the cartography department of the secret police. Only at the last moment, as he fell asleep—in order that his phantom could become more conscious—did he understand why Masha had trapped him.

Part III

The Cult of the Egg.

Church bells were ringing out across the city in celebration, clong-dong-clangle. The great edifice on Dzerzhinsky Square was almost deserted with the exception of bored guards patrolling corridors. In the mahogany-panelled office of the head of the directorate of censorship, General Mirov rubbed his rubicund boozier's nose as if an itch was aflame.

„How soon can we hope to have an accurate Great Atlas?“ he demanded sourly. „That's what *I'm* being asked.“

Not right at the moment, however. The six black telephones on his vast oak desk all stood silently.

Valentin blinked. „As you know, Comrade General, Grusha's disappearance hasn't exactly speeded the task. All the damned questioning, the interruptions. Myself and my staff being bothered at our work as though we are murderers.“

The ceiling was high and ornately plastered, the windows taller than a man. A gilt-framed portrait of Felix Dzerzhinsky, architect of terror, watched rapaciously.

„If,“ said Mirov, „a newly appointed deputy-chief cartographer—of reformist ambitions, and heartily resented because of those, mark my words!—if she vanishes so inexplicably, are you surprised that there's a certain odour of rats in your offices? Are you astonished that her well-connected parents press for the most thorough investigation?“

Valentin nodded towards the nobly handsome young man who stood expressionlessly in front of one of the embroidered sofas.

„I'll swear that Peterkin here has undergone a personality fluctuation because of all the turmoil.“ dangle, dong, clong. Like some mechanical figure heeding the peal of a carillon, Peterkin took three paces forward across the oriental carpet.

„Ah,“ said Mirov, „so are we attempting to clear up the matter of Grusha's possible murder hygienically in private? Between the three of us? How maternal of you, Colonel! You shelter the members of your staff just like a mother hen.“ The General's gaze drifted to the intruding object on his desk, and he frowned irritably „Things have changed. Can't you understand? I cannot suppress the investigation.“

„No, no, no,“ broke in Valentin. „Peterkin used to be a bit of a dreamer. Now he's a demon for work. That's all I meant. Well, a demon for the old sort of work, not for cartographic revisionism...“ As if realizing that under present circumstances this might hardly be construed as an endorsement, Valentin shrugged.

„Is that *thing* supposed to be a sample of his most recent work?“ The General's finger stabbed accusingly towards the decorated egg which rested on his blotting paper, geometrically embellished in black and ochre and yellow. „Reminds me of some tourist souvenir on sale in a foetid East African street. Some barbaric painted gourd.“

„Sir,“ said Peterkin, „it is executed in Carpathian *pysanka* style.“

„You don't say?“ The General brought his fist down upon the painted egg, crushing the shell, splitting the boiled white flesh within. „Thus I execute it. In any case, Easter is months away.“

„You're unhappy about all these new reforms, aren't you, Comrade General?“ Valentin asked cautiously, „I mean, *deeply* unhappy. You hope to retire honourably, yet what sort of world will you retire into?“

„One where I can hope to gather mushrooms in the woods to my heart's content, if you really wish to know.“

„Ah, but will you be allowed such tranquility? Won't all manner of dark cupboards be opened?“

„I'm busy opening those cupboards,“ snapped Mirov. „As quickly as can be. Absurdist plays, concrete poems, abstract art, economic critiques... We scurry to grease their publication, do we not? Grow faster, trees, grow faster! We need your pulp. Bah! I'm somewhat impeded by the sloth of your department of cartography. I demand true maps, as soon as can be.“ With a cupped hand he swept the mess of broken boiled egg into a trash basket.

„Those dark cupboards also contain corpses,“ hinted Valentin.

„For which, you imply, I may one day be brought to book?“

„Well, you certainly oughtn't ever to write your memoirs.“

„You're being impertinent, Valentin. Insubordinate in front of a subordinate.“ The General laughed barkingly. „Though I suppose you're right. The world is now shifting more swiftly than I imagined possible.“

„We aren't safe here, in this world that's a-coming.“

The bells continued to ring out cacophonously and triumphantly as if attempting to crack a somewhat leaden sky, to let through rifts of clear blue.

Peterkin spoke dreamily. „The egg celebrates the mysteries of birth and death and reawakening. Simon of Gyrene, the egg merchant, helped Jesus to carry his cross. Upon Simon's return he found to his astonishment that all the eggs in his basket had been coloured with many hues.“

„I'll bet he was astonished!“ said Mirov sarcastically. „There goes any hope of selling my nice white eggs! Must I really listen to the warblings of this tinpot Dostoevsky? Has the cartography department taken leave of its senses, Colonel? Oh, I see what you mean about Comrade Peterkin's personality. But why do you bother me with such nonsense? I was hoping to catch up on some paperwork this morning and forget about the damned—“

„Ding-dong of rebirth in our land?“

„Carl Faberge made his first imperial Easter egg for the Tsar and Tsaritsa just over a century ago,“ said Peterkin.

„Please excuse his circuitous approach to the meat of the matter, General,“ begged Valentin. „Almost as if he is circumnavigating an egg? I promise he will arrive there sooner or later.“

„An egg is like a globe,“ Peterkin continued. „The department of cartography has never designed globes of the world.“

„The world isn't shaped like an egg!“ objected Mirov, his cracked veins flushing brighter.

„With respect, it is, Comrade General,“ murmured Valentin. „It's somewhat oblate... Continue, Peterkin!“

„Faberge cast his eggs from precious metals. He inlaid them with enameling, he encrusted them with jewels. He even kept a special hammer by him to destroy any whose craftsmanship fell short of his own flawless standards.“

„What is this drivel about the Tsar and Tsaritsa?“ exploded Mirov. „Are you preaching counter-revolution? A return to those days of jewelled eggs for the aristocracy and poverty for the masses? Or is this a metaphor? Are you advocating a *putsch* against the reformers?“

„Traditions continue,“ Peterkin said vaguely.

„Yes,“ agreed Valentin. „We are the descendants of the secret police of the imperial empire, are we not? Of its censors; of its patriots.“

„Bah!“

Peterkin cleared his throat. He seemed impervious to the General’s displeasure.

„The craft of decorating eggs in the imperial style continues... in the dead ground of this very city.“

„Dead ground?“

„That’s a discovery some of us have made,“ explained Valentin. He gestured vaguely through a window, to somewhere beyond the onion domes. „The wholesale falsification of maps produces, well, actual false places—which a person in the right frame of mind can genuinely reach. Peterkin here has found such places, haven’t you, hmm? As have I.“

Peterkin nodded jerkily like a marionette on strings.

„You’re both drunk,“ said Mirov. „Go away.“

„I can prove this, General. Comrade Grusha strayed into one of those places. She was following me, acting as an amateur sleuth. Ah, the new generation are all such amateurs compared to us! Now she haunts that place because she lacks the cast of mind that I possess—and you too, General.“

„What might that be?“

„An instinct for falsification; for the masking of reality.“

„I’m charmed at your compliment.“

„You’d be even more charmed if you came with me to visit my darling young mistress Koshka who lives in such a place.“

One ageing man regarded the other quizzically. „You, Valentin? A young mistress? Excuse me if I’m skeptical.“

„You might say that such a visit is a rejuvenating experience.“

Mirov nodded, misunderstanding. „A youthful mistress might well be as invigorating as monkey glands. Along with being heart attack territory.“

„To enter the dead ground is rejuvenating; you’ll see, you’ll see. That’s one frontier worth safeguarding—the border between the real and the ideal. Perhaps you’ve heard of the legend of the secret valley of Shangri-la? The place that features on no map? To enter it properly, a man must be transformed.“

„That’s where the egg crafters come into this,“ prompted Peterkin.

„*Internal exile*, General! Let me propose a whole new meaning for that phrase. Let me invite you to share this refuge.“

„You insist that Comrade Grusha’s still alive?“

„Oh yes. She walks by my Koshka’s apartment at nights.“

„So where does she go to by day?“

„I suspect that it’s always night for her. Otherwise she might spy some escape route, come back here, stir up more trouble...“

„Are you telling me, Colonel Valentin, that some zone of aberrant geometry exists in our city? Some other dimension to existence? I don’t mean the one advertised by those wretched bells.“

„Exactly. Just so.“

Mirov stared at the portrait of Dzerzhinsky, who would have answered such an eccentric proposition with a bullet, and sucked in his breath.

„I shall indulge you, Colonel—for old time’s sake, I’m tempted to say—if only to study a unique form of psychosis which seems to be affecting our department of cartography.“

„It's best to go in the evening, as the shadows draw in.“

„It would be.“

„On foot.“

„Of course.“

„With no bodyguard.“

„Be warned, I shall be armed.“

„Why not, General? Why ever not?“

But Peterkin smirked.

So that same evening the three men went by way of certain half-frequented routes, via this side street and that alley and that square until the hollow raving of the bells was muffled, till distant traffic only purred like several sleepy kittens, and a lone owl hooted from an old-fashioned cemetery amidst century-old apartment blocks.

As if playing the role of some discreet pimp, Peterkin indicated a door. „Gentlemen, we will now visit a lady.“

Mirov guffawed. „This mistress of yours, Colonel: is she by any chance a mistress to many?“

„My Koshka lives farther away,“ said Valentin, „not here. Absolutely not here. Yet don't you already feel a new spring in your gait? Don't you sense the weight of years lifting from your shoulders?“

„I admit I do feel somewhat sprightly,“ agreed the General. „Hot-blooded. Ripe for adventure. Ah, it's years since... Valentin, you look like a younger man.“ He rubbed his hands. „Ah, the spice of anticipation! How it converts tired old mutton into lamb.“

Peterkin admitted them into a large foyer lit by a single low-powered-light bulb and decorated by several large vases of dried, dusty roses in bud. A faint memory of musky aroma lingered, due perhaps to a sprinkle of essential oils. A creaky elevator lifted them slowly to the third floor, its cables twanging dolorously once or twice like the strings of a double bass. Valentin found himself whistling a lively theme from an opera by Prokofiev—so softly he sounded as though he was actually labouring up marble stairs, puffing.

The dark petite young woman who admitted these three visitors to her apartment was not alone. Mirov slapped the reassuring bulge of his gun, as if to stun a fly, before relaxing. The other two occupants were also women, who wore similar cheap dresses patterned with roses, orchids, their lips and cheeks rouged.

„May I present Masha?“ Having performed this introduction, Peterkin slackened; he stood limply like a neglected doll.

„This is my older sister Tanya,“ Masha explained. Masha's elder image smiled. If the younger sister was enticingly lovely, Tanya was the matured vintage, an intoxicating queen.

„And my aunt Anastasia.“ A plumper, far from frumpish version, in her middle forties, a twinkle in her eye, her neck strung with large phony pearls.

Absurdly, the aunt curtsied, plucking up the hem of her dress quite high enough to display a dimpled thigh for a moment.

„We are chief Eggers,“ said Anastasia. „Tanya and I represent the Guild of Imperial Eggs.“

The large room, replete with rugs from Tashkent and Bokhara hanging on the walls, with curtains woven with thread of gold, housed a substantial carved bed spread with brocade, almost large enough for two couples entwined together,

though hardly for three. All approaches to it were, however, blocked by at least a score of tall narrow round-topped tables, each of which served as a dais to display a decorated egg, or two, or three. Some ostrich, some goose, others pullet and even smaller, perhaps even the eggs of canaries.

On gilt or silver stands, shaped as swans, as chariots, as goblets, these eggs were intricately cut and hinged, in trefoil style, gothic style, scallop style. Some lids were lattices. Filigree windows held only spider's webs of connective shell. Petals of shell hung down on the thinnest of silver chains. Pearl-studded drawers jutted. Doors opened upon grottos where tiny porcelain cherubs perched pertly. Seed pearls, lace, gold braid, jewels trimmed the doorways. Interior linings were of velvet...

To blunder towards that bed in the heat of passion would be to wreak devastation more shattering than Carl Faberge could ever have inflicted on a faulty golden egg with a hammer! What a fragile cordon defended that bedspread and the hint of blue silk sheets; yet to trespass would be to assassinate art—if those eggs were properly speaking the products of art, rather than of an obsessional delirium which had transfigured commonplace ovoids of calcium, former homes of bird embryos and yolk and albumen.

Aunt Anastasia waved at a bureau loaded with eggging equipment: pots of seed pearls, jewels, ribbons, diamond dust, cords of silk gimp, corsage pins, clasps, toothpicks, emery boards, a sharp little knife, a tiny saw, manicure scissors, glue, nail varnish, and sharp pencils. The General rubbed his eyes. For a moment did he think he had seen jars of beetles, strings of poisonous toadstools, handcuffs made of cord, the accoutrements of a witch in some fable?

„Aren't we just birds of a feather?“ she asked the Colonel. „You use the quills of birds for mapping-pens, so I hear. We use the eggs of the birds.“

„I've rarely seen anything quite so ridiculous,“ Mirov broke in. „Your eggs are gimcrack mockeries of Tsarist treasures. Petit bourgeois counterfeits!“

„Exactly,“ agreed queenly Tanya. „Did not some financier once say that bad money drives out good? Let's suppose that falsity is superior to reality. Did *you* not try to make it so? Did you not succeed formerly? Ah, but in the dialectical process the false gives rise in turn to a *hidden truth*. The map of lies leads to a secret domain. The egg that apes treasure shows the way towards the true treasury.“

Tanya picked up a pearl-studded goose egg. Its one oval door was closed. The egg was like some alien space-pod equipped with a hatch. Inserting a fingernail, she prised this open and held the egg out for Mirov's inspection.

On the whole inner surface of that goose egg—the inside of the door included—was a map of the whole world, of all the continents in considerable detail. The difference between the shape of the egg and that of the planetary globe caused some distortion, though by no means grotesquely so. Mirov squinted within, impressed despite himself.

„How on earth did you work within such a cramped volume? By using a dentist's mirror, and miniature nibs held in tweezers? Or... did you draw upon the outside and somehow the pattern sank through?“

„Somehow?“ Tanya chuckled. „We *dreamed* the map into the egg, General, just as you dreamed us into existence by means of your lies—though unintentionally!“

She selected another closed egg and opened its door.

„Here’s the map of our country... Ours, mark you, not yours. If you take this egg as your guide, our country can be yours, too. You can enter and leave as you desire.“

„Be careful you don’t break your egg.“ Aunt Anastasia wagged a warning finger.

„The same way you broke the *pysanka* egg,“ squeaked Peterkin, emerging briefly from his immobility and muteness. „Most of those eggs are technical exercises—not the one you hold.“ (For Mirov had accepted the egg.) „That was dreamed deep within the other country.“ Having spoken like a ventriloquist’s dummy, Peterkin became inert again.

However, he left along with his two superiors—presently, by which time it was fully night.

„Maps, dreamed on the insides of eggs! Deep in some zone of absurd topography!“ Mirov snorted. „Your escape hatch is preposterous,“ he told Valentin, pausing under a street lamp.

„Actually, with respect, we aren’t deep in the zone at all. Oh no, not here. But that egg can guide—“

„Do you believe in it, you dupe?“

„Why didn’t I receive one for my own? I suppose because I already know the way to Koshka’s place...“

Mirov snapped his fingers. „I know how the trick’s done. They use transfers. They draw the map on several pieces of paper, wet those so they’re sticky, then insert with tweezers on to the inside of the shell. When that dries, they use tiny bent brushes to apply varnish.“

Mirov removed the map-egg from his overcoat pocket, knelt, and placed the egg on the pavement under the brightness of the street lamp. Was he surprised by the limber flexibility of his joints?

„I can prove it.“ Producing his pistol, Mirov transferred his grip to the barrel, poising the handle above the pearl-studded shell. „I’ll peel those transfers loose from the broken bits. Ha, dreams indeed!“

„Don’t,“ said Peterkin in a lame voice only likely to encourage Mirov.

„Don’t be a fool,“ said Valentin.

„A fool, is it, Comrade Colonel?“

„If you’re told not to open a door and you insist on opening it—“

„Disaster ensues—supposing that you’re a child in a fable.“

Valentin knelt too, to beg the General to desist. To an onlooker the two men might have appeared to be fellow worshippers adoring a fetish object on the paving slab, cultists of the egg indeed.

When Mirov brought the butt of the gun down, cracking the egg wide open and sending tiny pearls rolling like spilled barley, a shock seemed to ripple along the street and upward to the very stars, which trembled above the city.

Although Mirov probed and pried, in no way could he discover or peel loose any stiffly varnished paper transfers.

When the two sprightly oldsters looked around again, Peterkin had slipped away without a word. The two men scrambled up. Night, and strange streets, had swallowed their escort utterly. Despite Valentin’s protests—which even led the men to tussle briefly—Mirov ground the shards of egg to dust under his heel, as if thereby he might obliterate any connexion with himself.

Eventually, lost, they walked into a birch wood where mushrooms swelled through the humus in the moonlight. An owl hooted. Weasels chased mice. Was

this woodland merely a park within the city? It hardly seemed so; yet by then the answer scarcely mattered, since they were having great difficulty remembering who they were, let alone where they were. Already they'd been obliged a number of times to roll up their floppy trouser legs and cinch their belts tighter. Their sleeves dangled loosely, their shoes were clumsy boats, while their overcoats dragged as long cloaks upon the ground.

„Kashka? Kishka? Was that her name? What was her name?“ Valentin asked his friend.

„I think her name was Grusha... no, Masha.“

„Wasn't.“

„Was.“

Briefly they quarrelled, till they forgot who they were talking about.

Through the trees, they spied the lights of a village which strongly suggested home. Descending a birch-clad slope awkwardly in their oversized garments—two lads dressed as men for a lark—they arrived at a yellow window and peered through.

Beautiful Tanya and Aunt Anastasia were singing to two huge eggs resting on a rug. Eggs the size of the fattest plucked turkeys, decorated with strange ochre zig-zags.

Even as Valentin and Mirov watched, the ends of the eggs opened on brass hinges. From each a bare arm emerged, followed by a head and a bare shoulder. The two women each grasped a groping hand and hauled. From out of each egg slowly squeezed the naked body of a man well past his prime, one with a beet-red face, though his trunk was white as snow.

„How did they fit inside those?“ Mirov asked Valentin.

„Dunno. Came out, didn't they? Maybe there's more space than shows on the outside...“

The two newly-hatched men—who were no spring chickens—were now huddling together on a rug by the stove, modestly covering their loins with their hands. Their faces looked teasingly familiar, as if the men might be a pair of... long-lost uncles, come home at last from Siberia.

By now the two boys felt cold and hungry, so they knocked on the cottage door. Aunt Anastasia opened it.

„Ah, here come the clothes now!“ Anastasia pulled them both inside into the warmth and surveyed them critically. „Oh, what a mess you've made of those suits. Creases, and mud. Never mind. They'll sponge, and iron. Off with them now, you two, off with them. They're needed. Tanya, fetch a couple of blankets for the boys. We mustn't make them blush, with a chill or with shame.“

„Do we have to sleep inside those eggs?“ asked Mirov, almost stammering.

„Of course not, silly goose! You'll sleep over the stove in a blanket. Those two other fellows will be gone by the morning; then you'll have a better idea who you both are.“

„Koshka!“ exclaimed Valentin. „I remember. *That* was her name.“

„Now, now,“ his aunt said, „you needn't be thinking about girls for a year or two yet. Anyway, there's Natasha in the village, and Maria. I've kept my eye on them for you two. How about some thick bacon broth with a sprinkle of something special in it to help you have nice dreams?“

„Please!“ piped Valentin.

When he and his brother woke in the morning a lovely aroma greeted them—of butter melting on two bowls of cooked buckwheat groats. The boys only wondered for the briefest while where they had been the evening before.

Tanya and Anastasia had already breakfasted, and were busy sawing ducks' eggs.

