

Volodya to Walter:
The Memoir of a Soviet Émigré in Two Parts

by

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Dedicated to Mr. Walter Kin, who has so graciously allowed me to tell his story, and who has been helpful and enthusiastic about the project over the past three years.

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Preface

This thesis aims to tell the life story of Walter Kin, formerly Vladimir Irmiyahev, in two mediums: text and film.

I first met Mr. Kin in 2015 on Craigslist. He was looking for someone to help him tell the story of how he was imprisoned in a Soviet psychiatric hospital at age seventeen for political reasons – a story he felt needed to be told. After exchanging a few text messages, we arranged to meet, and he told me his story from beginning to end. A few weeks later, I began conducting interviews with Mr. Kin, who provided an in-depth account of his story, from his childhood in Derbent to his arrival in America.

The first part of this thesis, titled *Volodya*, is based on these interviews, as well as on an audio series that Mr. Kin created titled Друдом (Madhouse). *Volodya* is written in a first-person memoir style and draws upon my reading of a number of memoirs written by well-known dissidents who were incarcerated and tortured for their political activity. Those works can be found in the Works Consulted page.

In 2017 I began filming for the second part of the project, a short documentary titled *Walter*. *Walter* approaches Mr. Kin's story from another angle, focusing on his current love of music and DJing. While *Volodya* is rooted in Mr. Kin's past, *Walter* focuses on the present, while also tying connections between his current life and his past experiences.

Each part can stand alone; one part does not require the other to be comprehensible. However, taken together, the two present a clear, well-rounded depiction of Mr. Walter Kin.

Table of Contents

Part I

Volodya	6
Chapter 1. <i>Derbent, Dagestan</i>	7
Chapter 2. <i>Moscow and the Khachaturian Ballet</i>	19
Chapter 3. <i>Sluggish Schizophrenia</i>	28
Chapter 4. <i>Insulin Treatment, Ilya's Sleep</i>	51
Chapter 5. <i>Release, Voroshilovgrad and Kursk</i>	63
Epilogue	77

Part II

Walter	78
Link to the film	79
Works Consulted	80

Part I: Volodya

1. Derbent, Dagestan

I tell this story for the first time. The story of how I was imprisoned in a psychiatric hospital at age seventeen. The story of how I was humiliated, tortured, and spat out into society.

My name is Walter Kin and I was born in 1961 in Derbent, Dagestan. Well, back then it was Vladimir... Vladimir Irmiyahev! Irmiyahev is the Russian form of Yirmeyahu, or Jeremiah. My family was Jewish; my grandmother kept kosher, but my parents did not. I remember my father always went to the shochet, a Jewish butcher, to buy kosher meat for her. My grandmother, my father's mother, was a strong lady. Her husband was killed on the front lines in the second World War, and after she received a letter informing her of his death, she moved to Derbent from a small village in the mountains with her four sons, one of whom was my father. My father is named Baruch but was called Boris in Russian. In his young adulthood he was a carpenter, and built mostly furniture, but also constructed entire houses from the ground up. He built our family house, however, out of yellow limestone. Limestone was a very popular construction material in Derbent for its beauty, and for the fact that it was very easy to work with.

I was born and spent my earliest years in the small house that my grandmother lived in when she first arrived to Derbent with her four sons. The garden had cherry and apple trees, and my father built a besedka, a sort of gazebo, where I sat with the neighboring children in the summertime, playing *Shesh-Besh*, a Turkish variant of

backgammon, and other games. Sometimes I would read aloud for my siblings and the other children, and while I never would consider myself a role model, I was a great storyteller and the younger children definitely respected me. I could carry the spirit of a story with ease and bring the characters to life. I performed many novels by Jack London in that gazebo, often by candlelight when the sun dropped below the mountain ridges which replaced the horizon line in the west.

At this point my father was at the height of his carpentry prowess. He built a veranda attached to the house, as well as a pool table made of wood and ivory. It was truly a beautiful table, with a simple elegance that was typical of all of his work. Understated and functional. He later went to college and became a carpentry teacher. In Russian schools there were always a few “hands-on” classes, and he taught woodworking to children of all ages. Of course, all the children loved him. In fact, he was popular with everyone, and he would even be invited to weddings and other celebrations to be an emcee, conducting the festivities.

My mother’s name is Valentina. She was a delivery nurse in her youth, and later, a gynecologist, one of the best in Derbent, and a genuine celebrity among the women of the town. She was intelligent enough to get into medical school, but the competition was fierce, and to have any guarantee of getting in you had to either have strong connections or grease the correct palms. Her father was an honest communist and vehemently opposed bribes. And so, despite her impeccable test scores, she was not accepted into the Moscow Medical University as a student proper, but a provisional student, who relied on others to drop out to officially become a student at the university. This went on for some time, about six months, before familial pressure

mounted for her to return to Derbent to settle down, get married, and have children. Eventually she did return, but even while she was pregnant with me she continued her studies, taking courses to become a nurse at the local hospital, and later a gynecologist. Her love for her profession was unrivalled, and everyone held her in high regard.

In the 1960s Derbent was really only a town of around eighty thousand. It stands on a two-mile strip of land between the eastern side of the Greater Caucasus and the western shore of the Caspian Sea. The mountains drop several hundred feet within a few miles of the coast, creating a narrow pathway between the sea in the east and mountains in the west. For many centuries Derbent was a center of arts and commerce. At its height it was an essential point along trading routes between Persia and Europe and was the only true land route that connected the continents. Unless you were brave (or foolish) enough to attempt traversing the Caucasus Mountains, you had to pass through Derbent, where a huge citadel awaited travelers, traders, and armies. For this reason, Derbent became highly sought after by rivaling Empires to the north and south and was the subject of disputes and battles. However, by the 20th century, and certainly during the Soviet era, the town's prosperity declined. The development of other methods of transportation, especially trains and ships, diminished the importance of land-trade routes and the traditional merchant caravan. The geopolitical significance of Derbent fell, but the long history of trade and human movement left behind an extraordinary group of languages and ethnicities. My class at school alone was comprised of Russians, Azerbaijanis, Armenians, a number of distinct Muslim groups, as well as Jews. In my family's case, the children spoke only

Russian as it was taught in schools, but my parents and grandmother spoke a language called Tat. Tat was a spoken language that combined old Persian, Hebrew, and some Tajik, which was only spoken by a few hundred thousand Jews and Muslims in the Caucasus.

School was easy for me, and I was especially good at math. When I was fourteen I won the citywide math Olympiad and even went to a regional competition, though I did not qualify for finals there. At this age I had a love for precision; definite answers which could not be argued, misinterpreted, or misunderstood. In math there is always a wrong answer, and a right one. If you studied the rules and methods, you could always find the truth. This was when I was sixteen, in 1977. The trigger for my political revelations was pulled in the same year, sending my life down an irreversible path.

The end of winter. Tulips began to poke out through the receding snow, announcing spring's arrival to the Caucasus. Unlike other aspects of Soviet life, the climate in our small corner of Russia did change in accordance with the laws of nature, undisturbed by bureaucratic meddling. Of course, if it were possible to regulate the changing of seasons I have no doubt that the Party would have hit us with unexpected snowfalls in July and scorching Februaries, but in any case, they had not yet managed to, and spring presented itself punctually, floral wares in tow. Physical education, confined to the gymnasium for the duration of winter, reemerged with the flora, and we were once again stretching beside the running track, adjusting our bodies for a number of exercises. All of us were keen for the warm seasons and what would again be possible after months of cold darkness.

We lined up for the long jump, a staple exercise. Each jumper would set off, building speed before reaching a threshold, where a final step would send the body into the air. Momentum from this final step would carry the jumper into flight, and it would feel as if the body just might be able to escape the Earth's gravity and expand outward into the sky, breaking any number of Olympic, world, and universal records in the process. I yearned for such a feeling of weightlessness. The sand pit beneath would fall away, trickling down the hourglass while I continued up, breaking through the glass bulb and continuing my trajectory for far longer than the sand would flow. But invariably no such physical epiphany ever occurred, and my body would come crashing down into the sand. After landfall, each jumper would smooth out the sand with their hands for the following leap. I wondered if any of the others shared my longing for physical weightlessness, but of course I didn't dare ask for fear of their inevitable taunts.

Behind me in the jumping queue was a boy my age. His name was Yuri, named after Gagarin who had, in fact, soared without weight past clouds and into space. There were a lot of Yuris born that year, 1961, and to say that Gagarin was a celebrity would be putting it very mildly. I myself was named after Vladimir Ilych Lenin, whose birthday, by some cosmic cruelty, I happened to share. Throughout my teenage years, I was silently envious of all Yuris, as I believed they had some hidden advantage in achieving flight. Indeed, this Yuri, with his strong wiry legs, jumped further than anyone else in the school by some distance.

For a long time, I thought he was much older than I was. Not only on account of his huge leaps, but because of the confidence with which he spoke about

everything even tangentially related to the building of Communism. He was a Komsomol fanatic, one of the most prominent members of our local Committee, but you would have thought he had witnessed the revolution being carried out personally some sixty years prior, such was the assuredness of his voice, the belief in his expression. I too was a Komsomol member. I was not involved to the extent that Yuri was, but I was certainly a patriot, and went to the local events. While we stood in line waiting to jump I overheard Yuri behind me chatting up others about upcoming Komsomol rallies and meetings. *Won't you come to such-and-such meeting concerning this-and-that policy. Won't you march here-and-there to do this-and-that for the tangible benefit of Socialism?!* I mock him now, but I was as dedicated as he was in those days, though I did not take it to his level of evangelization.

It was my turn to jump. I went through the motions, attempted liftoff, achieved a brief moment of flight, and landed in a heap. All as expected. I went to smooth out the sand for Yuri's jump when I felt a shadow looming above my head. The shadow crept into my field of vision, eating up the sand-pit one grain at a time, throwing a dark crimson sheet over each crystal sphere. I only caught a glimpse of what was casting the shadow before I was knocked unconscious, but the image was so striking that I will never forget it. It was Yuri, but not the same Yuri I was standing with moments ago. No, this Yuri was far more terrible, more horrifying than that other Yuri. Every muscle of his body was flexed, his loose athletic shorts and shirt billowed out behind him like a great cape. His right arm stretched back while his left shot skyward. On his face and in his eyes, I saw a calm, determined concentration, the sort you would expect to see cast in bronze. But his gaze was not fixed on me, or the

task of landing his jump. His eyes were set far away, on the horizon or even beyond it. His body had long known how to complete the jump, and his mind was elsewhere entirely. I only caught a glimpse of this image before I was knocked unconscious; Yuri's thigh struck my temple and I was out cold. When I awoke later in the emergency room I was told that Yuri had jumped too early. The nurse assured me that my injury was not in vain, however, as Yuri had set a regional record, albeit with the help of my now aching cranium.

I returned to school within a couple of days, but immediately I experienced a change in my interests. I quickly began to lose interest in math. It was drab and uninspiring; the figures and symbols lay flat on the page, glued into position by an endless number of mathematic regulations. My interest turned to history; the rise and fall of civilizations, the lives of great men, and the ideas that philosophers spawned and grappled with. I have always had a level of respect for figures who have affected how people think in all sectors of society. People whose ideas altered structures of behavior. Over the course of only a few weeks my mind underwent an evolution. It was evolution, to be sure, not revolution, as nothing I read changed the way I thought fundamentally, but rather, with each book or article, a gap in my knowledge was filled, another brick was laid in a continually growing castle. When the thigh of Yuri, the shining example of the new Soviet Man, came crashing into my temple, my mind was sent reeling. I began to look at the world around me with a new mindset. I began to realize the mechanisms of my society and pinpoint the problems that had gone neglected. From my earliest years I wanted to improve things around me. I always saw something incomplete; something that required closure. Now, in my heart and

soul, I realized that my country had problems that needed to be talked about and solved.

What a coincidence that Yuri, the physical manifestation of years of Soviet ideology would, with one mistimed jump, one hasty leap, send the wheels into motion of my own political musings. It was almost as if he had jumped too ferociously towards the new world; as if the Bronze Horseman had clipped my head with its heels as it leaped over the horizon into the imagined future of Russia. A patchwork quilt of a future, stitched together poorly with weak thread and blunt needles. And while the horseman continued to gallop into the fog towards the next life, I was left behind rubbing my head, knocked out of a deep sleep, feeling my own body for the first time.

This period of political awakening coincided with a love for poetry, and I began to write. I was heavily influenced by the great Joseph Brodsky and I tried to imitate his rhythm and tone. I found solace in the simplicity of creative writing. Something had been activated in my mind, and associations built themselves readily into meaningful shapes and images. With each poem, something new and unexpected would sprout into being. This, I imagined, was the closest one could get to that sense of weightlessness that I had longed for in the long jump, albeit spiritual, not physical. I could reach into my soul and create the world from scratch, and unlike the reality outside my small room in Derbent, no one had control over what I created, over what I thought and wrote. When I wrote I felt like a king! And after I finished a poem a great spiritual breath had been exhaled and I would be tired for hours. Each word cost another breath, and an entirely new system of artistic currency was formed, based on sharp intakes, gasps, and currents of air. The breath of a single person's poem was

negligible, akin to a pocketful of rubles, but in a town, there would be several thousand, a sizeable gale. And in a city the breaths and whispers would amount to a vast sum, perhaps several hundred thousand or even a few million! Then a veritable whirlwind would form, capable of sweeping across the world with its poems, essays, and novels. One day, a girl from my class named Larissa saw me writing at recess and invited me to read my poetry at a local writer's club, where people would meet to read and discuss one another's writing. The club was run by well-respected authors and journalists from the surrounding area, and there I found for the first time likeminded people who had a similar love of the literary that I did. This was the beginning of my interest in poetry, and politics. The latter would quickly come into conflict with Soviet authority with an ill-fated letter to Lithuania.

Something I had noticed during this period was that the Baltic Republics had greater civil freedoms and higher overall quality of life than some other parts of the country, certainly when compared to Derbent and Dagestan. I believed that it had to do with the fact that they had been occupied by the Soviets later than regions of Central Asia, resulting in a people more resistant to Soviet influence, with the living memory of independence fresher in their minds. Likewise, Soviet leaders treated the Baltics more gently than they did people from other regions, deciding that it was unwise to attempt to overturn their traditions and beliefs beyond what was necessary for compliance and order. In any case, the idea occurred to me to write a letter to the inhabitants of either Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia, and ask them what they had done to improve the quality of life in their society beyond that of other regions, like Dagestan, or even Russia proper. Of the three Baltic republics, I liked Lithuania the

most and after picking a city at random, I wrote a letter to the City Committee of the Komsomol in Siauliai, Lithuania. What exactly I wrote in that letter is fuzzy after all these years, but it was an effort to establish contact. To learn something about their society that I could then attempt to apply to my own society and improve life in Derbent. Of course, it was a very awkwardly written letter, and I am the first to admit that it was a naïve attempt, but my purpose was noble. It was truly a patriotic impulse that led me to send this letter. I felt that we were countrymen, from vastly different regions, but fellow Soviets nonetheless, and that we should collaborate and learn from one another. About a month later I received a reply. *Dear Vladimir. Thank you for contacting us. Could you please tell us a little bit more about yourself...* This was their reply, which, as you can see, did not even begin to even consider my question. It was clear that my inquiries had not been received well, or had confused the young Komsomol member who had first read it. In either case, I believed that their reply was written with advice from the authorities. Their approach to the response resembled the beginning of an interrogation, and I immediately halted correspondence, afraid that they had mistaken my intentions. I have no way to tell for certain, but I now believe that with this letter, the KGB first created a file on me. Nothing immediately dangerous, but the start of something. *Here is a potential dissident. Keep an eye on him.* A mark next to my name was made.

Summer. The days became longer and Derbent was heating up. In the summer the disenfranchised youth of Derbent would once again resort to infighting. Rival gangs would roam through the streets with knives hidden in their pockets, fighting and wounding one another. Thankfully I never became involved in this morbid

pastime, but I was always afraid of getting caught up in it, and my distaste for my hometown only grew as I approached young adulthood. I found life in a small town restrictive as I had no choice but to see many of the same people every day. They would wait around every corner, seemingly around the clock, waiting for me to walk unsuspectingly into their trap, where I would be drawn into long conversations that were closer to interrogations than they were to friendly chats. As I finished my education I knew that I had to leave Derbent.

Just after graduation I was dealt a stroke of luck. I won the local lottery and came into a sizeable sum of money, at least by my reckoning, and decided to travel to Moscow and escape the dusty heat of Derbent for at least a few weeks. My parents supplemented my winnings with a little extra cash and I made travel plans. I would take a train up the coast to Makhachkala, before flying directly to Moscow. On the day of my departure I arrived at the train station just as the sun rose up over the horizon in the east, where the calm surface of the Caspian met the sky. As the sun continued to rise, fog swept in from the mountains and blanketed the town, before wafting out over the still Caspian waters. It was very quiet, almost muted, and my footsteps were barely audible. The station was mostly empty but there were a few other travelers who loitered around, their faces tucked firmly into their coat collars so that only their brows and noses were fully visible. The train glided into the station without fanfare.

I have often heard Russia, and especially the Soviet period, metaphorically described as a train, with conductors who don't know where the train is heading. In my view a train is a poor analogy. A train will go precisely where the tracks take it,

and my homeland had no such route laid out. No one had ever suspected Russia to take the path it had in 1917 when the Bolsheviks took control, or in the 30s and 40s when the last became the first, and Stalin dragged Europe's ugly duckling onto center stage. Now, even in 1978, no one truly knew where we were heading. Yes, a train is a poor metaphor. I prefer to think of my country's path in terms of leaps. A mistimed leap has a knock-on, or domino effect. The first may be off by only a fraction of an inch, not enough to have a noticeable effect on its immediate outcome. But the second leap will be off by an extra inch, and the third will be displaced by a few inches. Each subsequent leap will be more difficult to land as the margin of error builds up. The one hundredth leap might as well be a blind step off a cliff, an impossible attempt to make up for hundreds of feet of previous errors.

2. Moscow and the Khachaturian Ballet

Vladimir Bukovsky wrote that in the countryside, people considered all Muscovites to be members of the Party. Had I known this fact perhaps I would have been more cautious. As it happened I was a young man, not even a man, of seventeen, and for the first time in my life I felt that I could relax. I was free not only of my parents' supervision, but also of the perpetual sense of dread which filled me back home. In Derbent I was always on edge, always wary of what might await beyond the next corner, whose eyes might peer out at me from the cracks in fences and window shutters. I was staying with my Uncle Anatoly, my father's brother, in his apartment with his family. They were all very kind and left me to my own devices, which I found comforting. I found the anonymity afforded to me by the city liberating; at any given moment, I could give myself to the Muscovite myriapod and melt into the hurried masses of commuters, dipping into a Metro station before popping up across the city in a matter of minutes. I had license to act as an individual for the first time, and I felt that I had more chances to make a good impression on people.

I was hugely impressed by Moscow. I spent my first few days simply exploring the winding streets, discovering at each bend another secret of the city, another marvel of architecture. I remember lining up for hours at Lenin's mausoleum, to finally stand face to face with my namesake, though at this point I am sure that I went there purely as a point of interest, rather than to confirm the death of a tyrant or behold the immortality of a god. I saw a lot of statues, and often sat by them while I wrote my poems. Of course, the monument to Yuri Gagarin was especially interesting

to me, as well as the one to Pushkin, but I felt myself increasingly drawn to the statue of the Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman. A true marvel. Almost one hundred feet of gleaming stainless steel which, more than even the onion domes themselves rose to the top of my mind as the first symbol I first thought of in relation to Moscow. The worker raised his hammer triumphantly towards the heavens, and the kolkhoz woman raised her sickle in turn, its sharp tip slicing through the clouds. Both of their free hands stretched back elegantly, as if to show off their immaculate bodies, or to reach back and grab Russia's past and pull it with them. At this point I still had a considerable patriotic streak; I felt that not everything was right in my country, to be sure, but that with discussion and new ideas, we could invigorate the system and finally proceed beyond the horizon, where the worker and woman directed their gazes.

I couldn't afford to go to bars or restaurants, but it was never my interest or intention to revel in Moscow's bright lights. No, I was content just to be here, to get a glimpse of somewhere different, and experience the culture and lifestyle of people who lived a world away from Derbent. Museums, outdoor concerts, and galleries were my mainstays, but my outstanding memory of Moscow, for the wrong reasons, was a ballet I attended at the Bolshoi Theater in central Moscow.

It was a Khachaturian ballet, a real event, and I arrived an hour before the performance began to soak up the occasion, and to have a look at the main hall before it was crowded with people. The sight that awaited me as I entered was something I had never seen before. Sweeping bands of gold-encrusted balconies looped from the entrance behind me toward the stage, with crimson red seats, curtains, and carpets

covering every surface that was not golden. Columns of chandeliers lined the balconies all the way around, with a much larger multi-tiered crystal chandelier suspended in the center of the ceiling. Around this shimmering centerpiece some figures were painted: Apollo and his nine muses. I took my seat, and while janitors swept the aisles clear of dust and debris I looked up at Apollo and his muses, and drawing inspiration from their images, mentally composed some lines of poetry. Just tidbits, pairs of words, morsels that I would save away for later. I leant my head back against the chair and allowed my mind to have some time to itself before the performance.

After what seemed like only a few moments people had already begun trickling into the auditorium, and my state of personal bliss was bitten into by the growing din of theater-goers. All at once the hall was packed, the bedlam finally popped my bubble, and I plummeted from my conversations with the muses adorning the ceiling. A barrel-chested man plopped down next to me. He was squeezed into a suit, and a gold-rimmed pince-nez framed his eyes. He blinked unseeingly at me before turning back to his companions. I looked around to see dozens of replicas of this man, all neatly dressed, with eyes like umlauts. My own attire was not shabby by any means, but I was certainly not dressed up in a full suit. It did not strike me to get all dressed up just to sit in a chair. Nonetheless I immediately felt underdressed and could sense the disapproving glares pointing in my direction, the eyes crawling up and down my spine. My previous sense of anonymity was unraveled. I slumped further into my chair. The curtain was raised, and the show began.

The ballet was Khachaturian's Spartacus. Crassus, a Roman consul returning to Rome from foreign lands, brings with him Spartacus, the Thracian king, as a captive. The dancer playing Spartacus captivated my attention; he twirled and paused among the Roman legionaries surrounding him before leaping up above their heads as the soldiers crouched with their spears and swords. Spartacus hung suspended in the air, and I was immediately taken back to the thought of Yuri's fateful leap. Spartacus, with one arm thrown back and the other up towards Apollo, had on his face the same intense concentration that Yuri did. The body had already completed the scene and his mind was elsewhere. I studied his face closely, looking for some secret to his suspension, but just as I began to peel back the mask from his face, he dropped back to the stage and the legionaries pounced.

I glanced to my left. The man in the gold-rimmed pince-nez was peering over at me. When I caught his eyes he quickly blinked and looked away. Back on stage Crassus' convoy was leading Spartacus in chains into the heart of Rome. Spartacus was shackled and humiliated, cast into the cells beneath the Colosseum. As I watched Spartacus, downtrodden in the dank Roman cell, a sense of unease began to bubble up in the depths of my stomach. The previously cavernous hall condensed into an office-sized room, warping my perspective so that my field of vision saw Spartacus, and Spartacus alone.

The Romans brought Spartacus blindfolded into the gladiatorial ring, and Crassus and his friends watched and laughed as Spartacus unknowingly fought and killed his friends and fellow prisoners. When Spartacus removed the blindfold to discover what he had done, horrified and angry, he incited the prisoners to rebellion.

The curtain fell. Intermission. My mind was racing. I had been fully caught up in the orchestra-induced fervor. I sympathized with Spartacus in an intense and visceral way, and felt the weight of opera glasses tracking me in the crowd from the dark balconies. I pushed my way through the crowd of audience members, looking for some respite from the noise. Each suited person I pushed past seemed to stalk me with their glances and I moved as fast as I could without breaking out into a run, ducking into a bathroom in the lobby.

I shoved my hands under the faucet and splashed water up into my face. My vision was already beginning to blur and the flickering pale green light in the bathroom sent waves of nausea racing through my stomach and up my throat. My sense of balance was thrown. The sense of unease that had begun during the show swelled up into a raging storm, crashing against one wall of my stomach, before ebbing away and racing towards the other wall. Each time the door to the lobby opened the thundering noise of hundreds of people sent another burst of nausea washing over me. I staggered through a stall door and sat down on the toilet seat, trying to calm my head and regain my balance. I tried to imagine the calm surface of the Caspian Sea, the sturdy Caucasus supporting my back like a throne. But the mountains gave way, the water frothed and hissed, and I was sucked into the depths of the earth.

I was awakened by the hum of the bathroom light which shone in front of me. I went to walk towards it but found that my body was heavy and unmovable. I was crumpled on the bathroom floor; the light was not in front of me but above. I was sweating profusely, and my nausea was replaced by a dull, focused pain, as if the

waters had reduced and focused their energy into a small, round stone, pushing the excess liquid out through my pores. In my waking moments, the discomfort was no worse than the aftermath of a stiff punch in the gut, and I managed to push myself up into a sitting position against the wall. Stability. As long as the walls stood straight, and the floor lay flat I would be okay. The din of the crowd had dissipated, and I sat for several minutes trying to think back on what had just happened. I thought about Spartacus, the Romans, and the terrible Crassus. The man in the gold-rimmed pince-nez, my feeling of entrapment in the auditorium after realizing I was underdressed. I dragged myself out into the lobby where janitors were sweeping up. I heard the muffled sounds of the orchestra from the auditorium and realized that the ballet had restarted, but I didn't dare reenter the auditorium and draw attention to myself. I rushed back to my uncle's apartment as quickly as I could manage.

I now view this incident alongside my head injury as a moment of destiny. An event which hastened me towards my fate. For weeks, the pain in my stomach persisted. It was not so bad that I was reduced to tears, but it was a continuous dull, stressful ache. The sort that goes on all day without subsiding, that keeps its' victim cooped up inside all day, making even a trip around to the stores an unthinkable ordeal. For me this was unbearable. I had an urge for interaction, for adventure of any kind. I was in Moscow for the first time in my fully conscious body, and to be trapped in a stuffy Moscow apartment with stomach pain while the rest of Moscow bustled on was to me a terrible fate. But there appeared to be no way out. I was not a resident of Moscow, so it would be difficult to seek treatment on my own, and the thought of revealing my illness to either my uncle Anatoly or my parents was unthinkable. I

could already hear my mother pleading with me to come home to Derbent, where she could take care of me, and find me treatment through her connections at the hospital. Despite my efforts to conceal my situation, my uncle Anatoly quickly realized that something was up, since I wasn't going out like I usually did, and was cooped up for whole days in my room. I eventually realized that if I did not call home, Anatoly would for me, and that would perhaps be the worst turn of events. I called my mother and told her what was going on. I was surprised, although it makes sense, that she had connections to doctors in Moscow. She spoke with Anatoly as well, and between them they arranged an appointment with a doctor who both my parents knew very well.

Her name was Lyudmila Kovalevskaya, a former military surgeon, and unbeknownst to me at the time, a figure at home in the elite medical circles of Moscow. My first impressions upon meeting her were completely positive. She was a kind and articulate person; her demeanor was relaxed, and the tone of her voice was assured and welcoming. She had a pleasant smile that put me at ease. The smiles; they represented one of the biggest differences I noticed between Moscow and Derbent. People in Derbent didn't smile much while people here smiled frequently and without apparent reason. Perhaps the suspicion I had of people in Derbent now left me off-guard, and I saw the smiles with too great a willingness to believe that they were well-intentioned. She conducted several examinations, consulting with gastroenterologists and other doctors to set about finding the cause of my stomach pain. The tests spanned weeks, and I returned to the clinic several times. It didn't seem to me that the tests had a logical progression towards a medical conclusion. One day they would appear to be on the

verge of a breakthrough, but the next day they would return to taking my blood pressure a number of times. Nonetheless the trials continued, and from all appearances the doctors believed each test could be the missing piece. On a day like any other I was waiting for another examination when Dr. Kovalevskaya spotted me as she was walking down the corridor. She waved me over and we entered her office, already talking. We began with the usual formalities. She made some remarks about the progression of the tests and asked me about my family, and what I thought of Moscow. But as the conversation went on it took a turn, and I pushed the topic from the ordinary to those which interested me more; the social and political. We had already spoken many times and developed a good rapport, so it made no sense to me to dawdle on small talk with someone so clearly intelligent. I felt comfortable with her. After all, she knew my parents, and was willing to go out of her way to help me with my stomach pain. From all appearances, she was someone I could trust. Economic reform had recently become an important topic for me as I began to notice the stark contrast in life between Moscow and Derbent, and how the region that I was from had been left behind by policy makers. I didn't even consider this subject to be overtly political. I firmly believed that these were subjects for patriots to discuss; it would be un-Soviet to *not* discuss them! But as I spoke she grew sullen. Of course, I realized much later in my life that it was dangerous for her to even listen to such things. In the late Brezhnev period it was still inadmissible to doubt the Party. Even the slightest deviation was dangerous. And so, her face grew sullen. To this day, I wonder what exactly she thought about me during that conversation. Perhaps she felt sorry for me, a young man who was still enthusiastic and believed that changing the Soviet system was possible.

Perhaps she thought that I myself was an informant, wearing a wire, with the KGB hovering over us to see if she would let me walk free. Then, there was the also the entirely likely possibility that she was silently objecting to every one of my points, mentally preparing the report she would file to the authorities. Listening to such words without the right response, or condemnation, could have long-lasting consequences for her career and her life. Yes, her face was very sullen.

After I finished my monologue she was silent for a moment, then began to speak, picking her words carefully.

“You raise fine points, Volodya, but I am not a politician; I am a doctor, here to help you with your stomach problem. So far, we have been unable to locate any physical problem with your stomach but feel that your suffering may be mental. You seem a little withdrawn, a little gloomy. I am not qualified in this field but would like to refer you a close friend of mine at another clinic where they can conduct further tests.”

She scribbled a referral on a slip of paper, folded it into an envelope and handed it to me with a smile. To tell the truth I didn't see any trick in this. I didn't perceive any deception in her eyes, which looked at me as kindly as the first day I had met her. She wrote the address down on another slip of paper.

3. Sluggish Schizophrenia

Kashirskaya Metro. I emerged from the station onto the highway median where cars flew by in both directions. Gasoline fumes were sent up into a whirlwind, catching the last of the autumn leaves and dust and sending them up into grainy clouds, plunging the whole highway on both sides into a deep crimson haze. I looked out in both directions, but the thickness of the pall was impenetrable. Other commuters rushed past me and disappeared into the mist, certain of their next step, assured in the direction of their paths. After some minutes, with the droves of cars persisting and Dr. Kovalevskaya's slip of paper fluttering in my hand, I picked a direction and set out, my body carrying me through the fog. I made my way to the side of the highway and turned onto another street. The hospital was surrounded by a short, white wall, behind which stood a row of densely packed trees. Eventually the wall turned inward, away from the road, to reveal a stout, four storied building. If I wrote that the building loomed up over me, or that its appearance was otherwise threatening, hindsight would be offering its useless warnings, and the fact of the matter was that the building was very ordinary. Of course, we now know that the gates to neither the gulag, nor to the Nazi concentration camps were labeled with any indication of their true nature, and it was no different in this case. By all appearances this was a regular city hospital. The complex was quite large, made up of several buildings, and I made my way through a grid of asphalt paths which framed grass fields. The trees were not as dense in the lawns as they were along the perimeters, and an eerie silence reigned over the entire lot. There was no one else outside. The faint

sound of cars washed up over the long walls of trees, which replaced the horizon with a swaying line where the wavering treetops met the sky. When I arrived at the reception it was quite busy. I sat and waited. I was too timid to approach anyone, and the receptionists were occupied with paperwork and conversations with nurses. I sat and waited.

The first indication that something unusual was going on was when two policemen brought in a man, who appeared to be in handcuffs. It was clear even to me that there was something wrong with him, some sort of mental abnormality. He was dressed in a raggedy bathrobe and his movement was slow, and jerky. His eyes were not fearful, but resigned, glazed-over, helpless. Beneath each eye swung a heavy bag. The nurses greeted him and the policemen cheerfully, as if running into old friends, and custody of the man was switched without commotion. Several minutes passed. A young nurse approached me.

“Are you waiting for a relative? Picking someone up?”

I replied that I was referred to the clinic by Dr. Kovalevskaya for further examinations and fidgeted to present her with the envelope that contained her letter. The nurse looked a little surprised, but nevertheless she took the envelope and told me to wait. I watched the nurse carefully as she walked towards the door beside the reception desk. She opened the envelope and began to look over the letter, reaching her other hand into her pocket and pulling out a door handle, which she inserted into the door. A door handle. I immediately felt a wave of terror crash over my body. I glanced around in a panic. Doors. Doors without handles. Doors inescapable. Once you entered this place, free-will was quite literally removed from your hands and

placed into another's. Once you entered this place, there was no way to leave. Not without a door handle.

The curtain raised. Behind the reception desk were filing cabinets labeled with various illnesses, psychiatric and otherwise; alcoholism, addiction, schizophrenia, psychosis. There was one drawer that was labeled "Special Cases." Tall burly men with crew cuts or shaved heads stood beside every door. This was not a normal hospital. Every part of me knew that something was wrong. I had to get out. My mind pleaded with my body to move itself from the chair, but there was no way out. The nurse returned.

"You know, I don't think I need any further examinations. I feel quite fine, I'll just go back home and rest up."

"I'm sorry, but I showed your referral to the doctor and he has decided that we cannot let you go. You must stay here."

If I had been a little braver, lied that I came here by accident, or hadn't shown her the paper, or hadn't told her that I had been referred to them as a patient, or... Hindsight, again, is an unhelpful advisor in my story, and something prevented me from speaking up. I was seventeen; it was unthinkable to disobey. The traces of patriotism that were slowly being stripped away still managed to silence my gut reaction that something was wrong here. In my heart and mind, I sensed that this was not a normal hospital, but my body held me locked in place. As the nurse's words ricocheted through my head and I began to understand the consequences of her words, an orderly approached me on each side. As they drew close to me, their grim

faces broke into smirks. Not friendly smiles, but smirks. They wanted me to speak up, to make a scene. Then they would have the pleasure of restraining me.

The nurse and orderlies escorted me through the door beside the reception desk, and into an office, where a doctor and two other nurses were waiting. The doctor had a toothbrush moustache and was wearing glasses with circular lenses. The nurses held notebooks at the ready and sat on either side of the doctor, who invited me to take a seat in the chair opposite him. Even as I went to take a seat the nurses began to scribble hurriedly in their notebooks, glancing up at me from time to time. Later, I discovered, they were already hard at work inventing the symptoms of an equally invented illness. The doctor grinned, revealing every exquisite tooth in his mouth.

“Good day Vladimir, how are you? You are well? How are your parents? Your brother Gena? Very well, very well. Your mother is still a nurse? I heard from my colleagues that she is highly skilled, could have even become a doctor! Ah well... Good, good...”

This was not a doctor and a patient but a jailer and a prisoner. This was an interrogation, but also a show of power. The doctor was demonstrating the level of his connections, the distance that he could reach to find out information about me. He began with the most basic facts; my family, address in Derbent, my school. He then began to ask me about my childhood, my earliest memories, my interests, my thoughts about what I wanted to do when I was older. I answered each of his questions, and all the while the nurses scribbled notes. He then began to ask me questions about the quality of my sleep throughout my life. Could I remember a time

when I experienced poor sleep? I replied that I had slept poorly on occasion, but that my sleep had been generally good throughout my life. He followed up with questions about irrational fears, times when I felt anxious, how my social life was. I replied to each question, slightly confused. These were questions that could only confirm that I was, in fact, a human being, and not some strange alien, but I was careful all the same, and answered calmly and truthfully, while not admitting to anything that I felt would be taken as negative. It all seemed to be going just fine. The nurses stopped writing, put down their notebooks, and the doctor looked at me.

“Volodya, you exhibit all the signs associated with the development of schizophrenia of the simple, or sluggish variety. I have read your referral letter, and after this talk my suspicions have been confirmed. You will stay with us for a period to undergo treatment. That will be all for today, we will speak again soon. Until then, the nurse will show you to your room. You will be quite comfortable here!”

What signs?! He had barely asked me anything of substance before coming to his conclusion! And what did he mean by sluggish? I was bewildered but didn't say anything. I sensed that nothing I could say would help me at this point. Clearly, I had said too much already. The nurse and two orderlies escorted me out of the office and brought me downstairs into a dimly lit cubicle. I saw the shower head in the corner of the ceiling and understood. I removed my clothes while the orderlies watched carefully. They snatched each item I removed and inspected it closely, turning out the contents of every pocket, checking every fold and seam for some hidden item.

Luckily, I had not brought my poetry notebook with me.

“You’ll get your clothes back when you leave,” said one of the orderlies, smiling slightly with the word *when*. I was handed a set of standard issue hospital clothing. I stood under a cold stream of water for a minute and put on the clothes, still wet. My mind was still spinning, and the doctor’s diagnosis rang in my ear. *Sluggish schizophrenia*. The two orderlies led me by the arms as the nurse recited the daily schedule.

It is difficult to know quite where to begin when describing my imprisonment in that psychiatric hospital. The facts, gruesome as they may be, have a clearer shape, and in that way, they are more tolerable, or more easily understandable at least. The feelings are altogether less straightforward. I will start with the facts. I spent one hundred days and five days, or approximately three and a half months in this psychiatric hospital. City Clinical Psychiatric Hospital #15.

After the first interrogation, my time in the hospital was divided among a few spaces: my room, the exercise courtyard, the medication room, the doctor’s office, the dining room, and the lounge. I was placed in a youth ward in a room with several boys around my age. The room had an odd feeling. It wasn’t quite a hospital room or a prison cell. Cracked wallpaper adorned with the sort of floral-design you would expect of a grandmother’s kitchen. Linoleum covered floors, some with faux-Persian rugs. The sort of bed frame you would expect in a dormitory, made of cheap, false-wood. A thin mattress without springs. A solitary exposed bulb drooped from the ceiling. The windows were barred. Of my roommates I remember few specifics. I forget their faces and their names, but the conversations I had with them have stayed with me. I will place their souls into the bodies of two boys: Vanya and Sasha. They

will give voice to the countless forgotten youths of #15. I hope I can do them some justice. Some were poets, others handed out leaflets. Some were like me and had said too much to the wrong person. I distinctly remember a pair of musicians who had been locked up for the songs they wrote and sang. By some miracle, perhaps through their connections, they had been allowed to keep their guitars with them. They would sing and play when the orderly on duty was amicable, and the rest of us laughed and listened with glee, savoring every note that they played, and word that they sang. I had never heard songs like these, with a masked political message that only we, the initiated, could understand. Despite all their efforts to stomp out subversive elements, the authorities had decided to group us all together! It would not be a stretch to suggest that some of the most engaging conversations I had during my life in the Soviet Union were with other youths in #15. We were from different backgrounds and were imprisoned for a multitude of reasons, but we had in common that the state had wronged us, suppressed us for our thoughts and ideas. This fact created a level of trust between us. And while we often sat, or lay in silence, other times the conversations were free-flowing, from the heady and philosophical to the everyday. I realized now that I was not alone. It was normal for me to think the way I did, to look critically at the structures around me and refuse to remain satisfied with the stagnation and absurd logic of Soviet society, and to strive to change it. I had met people who thought about poetry and literature the way I did at the writing circle in my hometown, but here I found people who were discontented by society to the same extent that I was.

Vanya, who had been in #15 for several months had built connections with some of the kind-hearted orderlies, explained to me that the hospital had several wards which contained different combinations of genuine mental patients and political inmates, based on qualifying characteristics such as a person's connections, reasons for imprisonment, or level of violence. My ward, the youth ward, contained primarily low-level politicals, who were university age or slightly younger, as well as a sizeable minority of actual patients. Some of these patients could be wild or aggressive, but many were reserved and kept to themselves. Vanya believed that they grouped the young politicals with a mixed bag of mental patients to frighten them and encourage them to accept their sentence and admit to their crimes without putting them at too much risk. Other wards contained repeat political offenders, who were older, and more well-known outside the walls of the hospital in literary circles or other subversive groups. I later learnt that #15 was an OPH (Ordinary Psychiatric Hospital), and that all of the most famous political activists were placed into SPHs (Special Psychiatric Hospitals.) In all cases the political inmates were left in no man's land, between those who would attack you for looking, or not looking at them funny, and those who would rob you of your meager food rations.

Orderlies. The orderlies provided the nurses with a police arm, to discipline patients who got rowdy or did not otherwise cooperate. They were mostly criminals who, when offered, had chosen to serve their sentences working as orderlies rather than do their time in a regular prison or doing hard labor. They were hooligans, who entered the psychiatric hospital out of choice, and enacted the violent will of the nurses with glee. Every moment I spent outside my room I could be sure that there

was at least one watching me. They were stationed in every corridor, plastered into the walls like gargoyles, ready to emerge from the shadows at the nurse's call. However, there were some for whom the work was just that, and the orderlies that Vanya had built relationships with were in this category. But the clear majority of orderlies relished their task, and the patients, especially the politicals, were their primary source of entertainment. When the beating of a political patient was underway, the orderlies swarmed through the halls to get a bit of the action. Usually the nurse limited it to one or two orderlies and sent the others back to their posts, but other times she would leave them unattended, and while the patient would cry for the nurse to return, several orderlies would tie him to his bunk and take turns striking him.

I know of three medications that I was poisoned with during my imprisonment: aminazine (chlorpromazine), sulfur (sulfozinum), and insulin. The quotidian medication was aminazine. Each day, in the morning or after lunch, groups from each room in the ward would be summoned for medication. We would line up in the corridor outside the medication room and enter one by one. Inside waited a nurse and an orderly. A table lined with rows of small plastic cups filled with pills. In the center of the room lay a trestle-bed. Each patient entered the room and the nurse handed them their cup of pills. The patient would take the pills in front of the nurse who, armed with a large, spoon-like instrument, would then lift the patient's tongue up to check if he had hidden the pills against his gums or beneath his tongue. If he had not, the patient would return to his room where, well... more on that later. If he had concealed the pills and was caught, the punishment was twofold. The patient

would be switched from pills to injections. The orderly in the medication room would wrestle you onto the trestle-bed, while the nurse would prepare a needle to inject the aminazine. You could be sure that they used the same needle on multiple patients. Your daily aminazine dosage would also be increased, and you would be put on sulfur treatment as well, especially if you were a political patient. The effects of aminazine were sudden and debilitating. The kindest descriptor I could use for aminazine is that it is a hellish sedative, that interrupts any normal sleeping, eating, and social patterns that a person could hope to achieve in the jungle of the psychiatric hospital. The effects quickly took complete control, and motor functions were severely impaired. Taking the medication in pill form allowed me just enough time to return to my room before a deep, frenetic, restless sleep would take complete hold. To move or stand under the effects of aminazine was almost impossible; the weakness of an otherwise healthy body was comparable to weeks of malnutrition.

The first week, when my body was unused to the drug, was a blur. After taking aminazine in the morning I would sleep through the whole day for ten to twelve hours, through meals and exercise periods, awoken only by the sounds of patients and orderlies shouting. I would often awaken in the dead of night choking on my sweat, to the far-off scream of a patient being savagely beaten in another wing. Under the veil of the aminazine-induced sleep I heard and sensed everything happening around me, but my urge to attempt comprehension of my surroundings was completely killed. Through my restless sleep I could feel the glare of the exposed bulb above my cot, and not in the sense that its light penetrated my eyelids; I felt its beam concentrated on the center of my brain, somewhere deep and irretrievable. I

could detect each distinct burst of light sent out in concentric circles by the flickering bulb like a film run through a projector at half-speed. Black dots and rings of light filled my mind. The room plunged into darkness and blinding light, and I would open my eyes to find no clearer an image than those spirals of light that danced in my mind. Images would shimmer about the ceiling, oscillating from wall to wall, before collapsing back into geometric shapes and lines. My perception of sound and light was continually dulled and sharpened. In one moment, an image would snap into focus, the next it would blur and fall away. When I awoke to find that the effects had worn off it felt as if I had not slept at all, and a tug-of-war would begin between my body, which screamed for sleep, and my mind which wanted nothing more than to stay awake. I could hear the voices of people around me with intense clarity, the groans and cries of those injected with sulfur were distinct, but I was drained both physically and mentally. I neither wished to cover my ears with my hands to block out the noise, nor could I summon the strength to move my hands in the first place.

My first week was spent entirely in this state, but as my body became more used to the poison, the aminazine affected me with such ferocity less frequently, at least physically. Emotionally and mentally the drug continued to take its toll, and my overall condition deteriorated steadily over the course of the weeks and months. But despite the comatose days that characterized the entirety of the first week and much of the second, I managed to pick up from Vanya that all political patients, himself included, had been diagnosed as I had been, with this sluggish schizophrenia. I would learn later that *only* political patients had ever been diagnosed with this version of the illness. Sluggish schizophrenia was the invention of Soviet psychiatrist Andrei

Snezhnevsky and could only be detected by psychiatrists within the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc. The illness was characterized by, well, nothing at all. The symptoms of schizophrenia would supposedly “lie dormant,” hence the “sluggishness” of the illness. This abstract definition allowed for a wide-net to be cast in the search for non-conforming, inconvenient citizens, and politicals on all levels could be picked up and diagnosed with varying progressions of the illness. Every human characteristic was warped into evidence of the schizophrenia’s progression. As with the KGB, once they had you in their grasp, the crime, or in this case the illness, could be invented. “Find me a man and I’ll find him a crime” was here transformed into “Find me a man and I’ll find him a symptom.” I had already experienced the first part of this process in my initial meeting with the doctor, where he established the sluggish nature of my illness. In our second meeting I was confronted with the next stage, when he would warp my words and proclaim the progression of schizophrenia. The nurse and two orderlies escorted me from my room through a few corridors to the doctor’s office.

The interrogation began with a summary of our previous conversation. The doctor did most of the talking, and read several passages from a sheet of paper, clearly drafted from the notes taken by the two nurses. I immediately could tell that this was not going to go well. He was setting everything up with detective-like precision, and all I could do was agree with what I knew I had said, to avoid being contradictory. After he had laid this groundwork, he pulled out my poetry notebook, the one that I had left in my suitcase at my uncle Anatoly’s the day I had come to the hospital. With the help of the KGB, I later learned, they had quickly discovered where I was staying. Anatoly, when face-to-face with a KGB agent, had had little

choice. I knew that he was ready to draw every ounce of meaning he could from the words I had written. Every pencil mark would be warped, dismantled and reconstructed as gallows with the Soviet Union personified hanging from it, and my name signed beneath. Thankfully I had bought a new notebook for my trip to Moscow, and it contained mostly my impressions of the city. However, the doctor continued.

“Vladimir. You said in our previous meeting that you have not experienced poor sleep recently. In your notebook you have detailed in several places that you have often been up late worrying about your future, and the future of the Soviet Union.”

I was taken aback. I began a reply but stammered. I sensed that hesitation and deflection would be seized upon equally by the doctor, but despite my best efforts I could not provide answers that could explain my contradiction.

“I, err, you see, it was only a couple times that I slept poorly, I wrote it for poetic reasons, I was homesick... Yes, and jetlag, you see, I had just flown in from Derbent and was in an unfamiliar bed and city. It is only natural...”

The doctor bent and worked my words like a blacksmith, sculpting the conversation and my words into monstrosities.

“But you mention it more than a few times. Do you think that your poor sleep has had an adverse effect on your social life? Perhaps it has had an effect on your relationship to society, pushing you away from others. Perhaps that is why you doubt the future of our country... Come, Vladimir, we must work together to determine the severity of your illness.”

Find me one person who has never slept poorly! Find me a single measly soul who has never been awake until dawn with some existential dread, some uncertainty of their future! Of course, I did not say this. That would have only emboldened the doctor, sent a gleam into his eyes, an extra tooth into his wide grin. He now appeared before me as an owl, peeking out through his circular lenses, attempting to convince me of the benefits of hopping into his beak. Who would sleep poorly with existential dread? Certainly, not a good Soviet citizen. Who could be uncertain of the future when Communism was well on its way to being built? Any good Soviet citizen that you know? Certainly not. The doctors had decided that only the mentally unwell could doubt the inherent correctness of the Soviet system.

“And what about the head injury that you suffered recently? Could that event have had an adverse effect on your sociability? Perhaps that was an inciting incident, that cause you to become introverted, and distrustful of the Soviet way of life.”

He flexed his knowledge. He had tracked down the nurse who had treated me at the hospital in Derbent and was attempting to warp my injury into evidence of isolation. In a sense he was correct, as I had become interested in politics for the first time after that head injury. But rather than isolate me as he suggested, it had only brought me closer to society, face-to-face with the farce of it all. I quickly shot back a retort. “I returned to school and my friends the next day. My injury did not affect me in. There was nothing special about it.”

The doctor paused for a moment, making sure the nurses scribbled my every word. “Do you understand why you are here, Vladimir? Do you think that we hospitalize healthy men in this country?”

Again, I hesitated. To acknowledge that I understood why I was being kept here would be interpreted as an admission of guilt. “I do not understand why I am being kept here. I am mentally sound.”

“So, you think that we hospitalize healthy people? You have a persecution complex, Vladimir, a sure sign of your illness’ progression. You think the world is out to get you, pushing in on you from every side!”

To disagree that I belonged in the hospital, or even to deny the doctor’s trains of logic, was equitable to a rejection of Soviet authority. This pattern continued. Each question turned into *Admit your guilt* in my ears, and the sound of scribbling by those two harpy nurses grated my ears. Answering too eagerly, or with the slightest hesitance, would be seized upon equally by the doctor. Pausing too long? *Silence tactics!* Answer too quickly? *A lie, or a cover story!* You had to answer neither logically nor illogically, neither cheerfully nor reluctantly. His questions ate away at me. He seized upon every inkling of a contradiction, letting the conversation ebb and flow, even stagnate at times, before forcing it towards a single, unavoidable point.

“What was the nature of your conversation with Doctor Kovalevskaya. Was it political in content?”

“The conversation was personal. It had to do with my stomach problem.”

“I am unsure of what you consider personal. It appears to me that you are an isolated individual, distanced and uncertain of society... What you consider your own personal problems are in direct conversation with society... You place yourself in opposition to what is considered normal behavior in our society.”

I didn't fully understand what he was getting at, and that was half the point. It was impossible to find an answer that would not condemn me. I prepared my reply.

“There are personal subjects, and there are societal subjects. The two are distinct and should be treated as such. My conversation with Dr. Kovalevskaya was personal in content.”

“There is a difference between the distinct and the severed. Believe me, Vladimir, you have become withdrawn into your own vision of the world. It is quite clear to me. You are distrustful of anyone outside of yourself. And do not think for a moment that I believe your discussion with Dr. Kovalevskaya was personal. I have read her note several times and it is quite clear. It is better for you to drop the act. Believe me...”

On it went. Another symptom that the doctor narrowed in on was megalomania, or a warped perception of reality.

“You think you are making profound discoveries about Soviet society, but you are truly insignificant. Or do you think differently? Do you think yourself to be a liberator, like Lenin?”

You would think that all Soviet citizens should strive to be like Lenin, but in the psychiatric hospital to aspire to be like Lenin was a sign of a warped sense of self-importance, or megalomania. If Lenin himself had walked in and had a conversation with this doctor he would have found himself straightjacketed and in solitary confinement! The questions began to slow down and the interrogation ground to a halt. I had not admitted to the political nature of my conversation with Doctor Kovalevskaya but realized that any admission on my part was unimportant. The

doctor had already established everything that he needed to, in order to justify keeping me here.

“That will be all for today Vladimir. I understand the nature of your illness very well... We will need to work together to cure you. For now, you will continue on your current medication. However, if we cannot make any headway we will have to take a different approach...”

I have mentioned sulfur injections a few times. Sulfur (Sulfozinum) was the primary punishment medication dealt out by the nurses to any prisoner without oversight or justification. The most common reason, officially, was patient violence. This would include self-defense against violent patients, as well as orderlies, but sometimes speaking to the nurse in the wrong tone of voice would be enough to be marked as violent. On many occasions I witnessed other boys in my ward send out a stray arm or leg when being beaten up by orderlies, not out of hatred but out of human instinct. The nurse, who was always watching, would simply make a note on his file of “violence,” or “excitement,” and prescribe sulfur to punish him. Aminazine doses would also be increased, and the nurse would switch the patient from pills to injections. The omnipresent threat of increased doses of aminazine and sulfur kept most of us in check, myself included, but like our symptoms, the definition of what constituted “violent behavior” fluctuated wildly from day-to-day, leaving us in a constant state of uncertainty and terror. One day the orderlies would allow boys to fight, and violent patients to attack politicals without reprisal, while another day speaking out of turn would be cracked down on. *Getting excited? Sulfur. Trying to beat up the orderlies, eh? Sulfur.* Punishment by sulfur was inconsistent at best, and

arbitrary and indiscriminate at worst, and depended entirely on the mood of the nurses on duty. Sulfur was always injected, and the effects were nothing short of horrific. Like aminazine, sulfur was administered in the medication room. Despite my efforts to keep a low profile, I myself underwent sulfur treatment on two occasions for a single misdeed.

I was sitting in the lounge, a small room that was attached to the dining hall. Some board games were provided, and I usually spent the time between the end of dinner and the time when we were required to return to our rooms there, playing chess with Sasha. There were a few other boys, playing chess or checkers at tables, a few chairs, a couch, and a refrigerator that was always locked with a large padlock. An orderly sat on a tall stool near the entrance. Some of the other boys were munching on sandwiches, sent in packages by their families. These packages would always include food, as the meals we were provided with were low in nutrition and variety. However, there were some rumors circulating that a group of boys were stealing packages from the other boys. Vanya had been victim a few times and had taken to eating whatever was sent to him in secret in his room, something that the nurses would punish on occasion. I hadn't seen them myself, but Sasha had.

The boys entered the room. Sasha whispered this fact to me across the table, and I snuck a glance at them while I made my move. Bishop to D4. There were three of them, the biggest appeared to be older than me, but was around my height, perhaps a few inches shorter. The other two were skinny, clearly sidekicks to the largest boy. Sasha captured my bishop. A poor move on my part. One of the boys from another table got up from his game and went over to group of three. They began talking. Not

thinking straight, I sent my queen into the heart of the battle. Sasha whispered to me that the boy who went over was one of their victims; they had stolen his packages on several occasions. I felt an anger building up inside me. I am not an angry person, but these thieves really ticked me off. There were enough things that we had to be wary of already. The nurses, orderlies and uncertain environment of the psychiatric hospital offered more than enough obstacles without the addition of rogue groups of thieves, who took advantage of the meager packages that we were afforded. Sasha captured my queen. Check. The thieves and the boy continued to talk. Their voices grew more animated, bordering on the argumentative. The orderly looked up from his stool but did not move. My king was exposed, and I frantically castled him to get him out of check, but the bricks were already falling around his head. The game was practically lost. I rose from my chair and made my way over to the thieves and other boy. I stepped up to the circle and asked what was going on. The victim was clearly intimidated by the other boys and said nothing. The largest boy, the ringleader, confronted me and told me to mind my own business, to stay out of it. I, of course, knew perfectly well what was going on and did not back down. The threat of sulfur treatment was far away, way over the horizon, not even remotely in my line of vision. No sooner had he spoken then the fight began. It was a quick brawl, and my height gave me the advantage. I rained the majority of blows before the orderly swooped in to break up the fight (though he made sure to allow the fight to begin), and several more orderlies flooded through the door. Unusually, they did not beat either of us up on the spot, and instead took us back to our respective rooms. The boys stopped stealing.

I lay in my cot. Sasha had told Vanya what I had done, and they were quietly talking among themselves about what fate would befall me. They were quite sure I would be put on sulfur treatment and agreed that it was unusual that I was not beaten on the spot. Sasha believed that they may have something more in store for me. I lay awake in my cot all night waiting for something to happen. More than anything I didn't want to wake up in the middle of the night to be hauled away for sulfur treatment. I wanted to at least be awake to witness my fate head on. But no sound came from the corridor, and I eventually fell asleep.

In fact, it wasn't until our ward was called for our daily medication that I was reprimanded. I guess this way the nurse already had me in her clutches and didn't have to make a scene by calling orderlies to haul me from my room late at night, which would have only caused confusion and anger among the other patients. To keep the outward appearance of "business as usual," was very important in maintaining the façade of the hospital. When I entered the medication room for my aminazine, the nurse checked my file and saw the recommendation of sulfur. She looked up at the orderly who instantly pounced, a look of mirth sprung across his face. I didn't struggle much. I knew that would only make matters worse, and when another orderly entered the room and helped to subdue me I wouldn't have been able to defend myself in any case.

They pinned me down to the trestle-bed, and I felt dull, thick needle stick into me. I fainted immediately. When I awoke, the orderlies were grinning at me, while the nurse was giving the next patient his aminazine. I felt violated and dehumanized. The effect of the sulfur was instantaneous, and an intense burning which began in my

buttock began to spread slowly into my legs and abdomen. The burning pain flared with every attempt I made to rise from the trestle-bed. The nurse looked at me. *Ah, it's his first time. Orderlies, bring him back to his room.* The orderlies dragged me by my arms back to my room and dumped me onto my cot. I lay helplessly as the sulfur worked its way through my body. I could feel my blood carrying the poison down my legs and up my chest and spine. I faintly remember the faces of my roommates, watching me with sad expressions on their faces. *The first time is the most difficult* said one. *Someone get him a hot water bottle* said another. I tried to talk, but my words must have been garbled or nonsensical, and no one responded. Soon the sulfur reached my head and I could not speak. My breath became shallow and irregular, my muscles began to tighten, wrapping around my bones and joints like snakes, ready to explode from the bone if I made the slightest movement. My temperature began to rise well past feverish and I sweated through my clothes. Of course, I missed all my meals that day, and the night was completely devoid of sleep. A few days later I received a second injection of sulfur.

Stalin never died in the psychiatric hospital; news of his death failed to penetrate the lines of trees which surrounded the hospital, and while the country mourned his death, the doctors and nurses continued to carry out their daily rounds, only making slight adjustments to the treatment of politicals based on new letters and directives that piled up on someone's desk. How sane anyone could be in this country after forty years of war, famine, and purges was apparently, something that the doctors had not considered, and Sasha even joked that the rest of Soviet society was the madhouse and we were the only ones living freely. But here, where the sane and

genuinely ill were mixed together, the lines of sanity were expertly hidden. For those not already disturbed, the madhouse would serve as a perfect vehicle for madness. I did my best to attach myself to a few people, my Vanyas and Sashas, while not pushing away too many people and appearing neurotic. We required a resilience of spirit to keep our hands firmly gripped on sanity, and we helped one another through the difficult nights by discussing this and that, and letting our minds wander...

... “What then of the Karamazov brothers, Sasha?” whispered Vanya. It was late, past lights out, and we were huddled at the edges of our bunks, speaking with hushed voices. “Was Ivan wrong to return his ticket and reject a world he had no interest in?”

“You turn my words against me, Vanya!” retorted Sasha, “I merely believe that we have turned in our tickets too early, and in too small numbers to have any effect. Well, it was more of a seizure of our tickets... Perhaps they were counterfeit!” He snorted. “But in any case, the show is sold out. We may go to the box office and plead with the teller for a new ticket, but what can he do? There are no tickets left! We may bring gifts of caviar, but he will not budge. For all the caviar in the Caspian! ‘Sorry boys,’ he’ll say, ‘You should have thought of that when you turned them in! Someone else came along and snatched them up!’”

“At best,” interrupted Vanya, snickering, “He could sneak us in through the janitor’s entrance and we could watch timidly, hidden behind some props backstage, craning our necks to get a peep of the ongoing show! What’s the point in hurting your neck for a bad view?!”

“All the better we don’t get in,” someone called from their cot, “We know the show is shit, that’s why we turned in our tickets in the first place! We’re better off down the street having a drink while everyone’s distracted!”

The whole room erupted into laughter. People feigning sleep couldn’t pretend any longer. We heard an orderly stomping through the corridor and immediately quieted down. He opened a small hatch and a light shone about the room, scanning for smirks or open eyes. No one made a peep. The light disappeared, and the sound of footsteps faded away.

Yes, to survive in here you had to have a resilience of spirit, a mind that could float through the ceiling and think beyond the four walls of the cell, the next meal, or the next game of chess. And it was not enough to reach just past the walls of the facility back into Soviet reality. You had to reach much further than that, into literature, art, or even pure sensation. I have never had any great affection for my hometown, but I found myself thinking of an idyllic Derbent; the tall mountains at my back, the Caspian spread before me. The sound of waves crashing up on the rocky shore was still audible, even here in #15.

4. Insulin Treatment, Ilya's Sleep

Insulin treatment. I have so far discussed aminazine and sulfur. I have saved my discussion of insulin for the end for two reasons. First, it was the last of the three drugs that I was tortured with, and second, it was the most terrible in its psychological and physical effects. Insulin treatment is based on two facts. First, that the human brain requires glucose to function; when the body is deprived of glucose the brain begins to shut down. Second, that insulin can be used to regulate the glucose level of the body, as it is with diabetes. These two simple facts were combined in the psychiatric hospital to devastating effect.

I don't remember exactly when I was treated with insulin, or what reasoning they used, but it must have been mostly because of my continued resistance to the doctor's diagnosis, and my refusal to accept that I had been hospitalized with just cause. However, my spirit was beginning to crack, and I think they saw that I was close to giving in and seized the opportunity. The first sign that something was up was when the nurse allowed the rest of my ward to go to the dining hall for breakfast but required that I be held back. The orderlies remained with me by my bedside while the other boys filed out of the room. I later read that this was common practice before insulin treatment, and that by depriving me of my breakfast, the nurses made sure that my glucose levels were already low before the treatment began. After the noise of the other boys walking to the dining hall died down, the nurse and orderlies escorted me to the medication room. I imagined that I was in for another treatment of either aminazine or sulfur for some misstep I had unknowingly made, but I was wrong. The

orderlies tied me to the trestle-bed and the nurse prepared to insert the needle. Then began a three to four-hour blackout. The insulin quickly destroyed what little glucose remained in my body and I lost consciousness. My brain, deprived of fuel, shut down, and I lay, slowly dying, tied to the trestle-bed. The purpose of tying me down, I learned, was because the symptoms of insulin shock were akin to epilepsy, with full body convulsions interspersed with comatose states. The devil only knows what irreversible damage was done to my brain during those hours when my life was dangled out over the abyss. I have no doubt that this torture destroyed the most fragile parts of my brain, which housed parts of my imagination and soul. The non-automatic functions of my brain were put under assault by the insulin, which seeped through my consciousness, eating up my brain one cell at a time. The insulin unlocked the vaults of my mind, where I had hidden exquisite gems of lyricism, abstract thought, the seeds of poems, and put the torch to them like Nazis burning books. And there I lay on the trestle-bed, unconscious as this atrocity was being carried out within me.

Out of nowhere, in the truest sense of the expression, I was wrenched back to life by an injection of glucose from the nurse. The walls rose up from the void into upright positions. The floor flew up from the cosmos, and with each blink, the morbid scene of the hospital snapped back, piece by piece. One blink would see the window materialize. The next blink would reveal the nurse tidying up the needles. The orderlies' stupid grins. The hallway. The cell. My bed. Each object would only become real when it came into view. The world reassembled itself slowly but surely after insulin treatment, until it all happened again the next morning. With each round of treatment, the walls would rise more slowly, and the world would piece itself

together more slowly. The insulin treatment lasted seven, maybe ten days, though such details are long lost to the needle.

I can say with certainty that the insulin treatment was a turning point, not only for my time in the hospital, but for my life after it. The aminazine was physically debilitating, the sulfur was excruciatingly painful, but the effects of both were mostly temporary. With insulin the effects were permanent, and I felt immediately that I had been mentally suffocated. After I would leave the hospital, the effects of aminazine and sulfur would be distant, terrible nightmares. The effects of insulin, on the other hand, would stay with me for the rest of my life. My will to read, and to write; to speak out was trampled.

“Do you know the myth of Ilya Muromets,” Vanya began one day. A few of us shrugged. The name was foreign to us. “He was a bogatyr, an epic warrior of Kievan Rus’,” Vanya continued, “He lay sleeping for many years, centuries perhaps, before finally awakening to deliver the Russian people who had suffered during his sleep, preyed upon by a terrible robber named Solovei. I believe that each person living under Communism in the Soviet Union has an Ilya within them, who must awaken to liberate the individual from the bonds of Socialist life. For some, like us, Ilya has awoken. For others, his sleep will continue indefinitely.”

“Are those for whom Ilya has not awoken at fault?” Sasha interjected, “And if there are only those for whom Ilya has awoken and those for whom he remains sleeping, our country could not have gotten to be the way it is. There must be a third group, for whom Ilya has awoken, but whose influence is stifled by bodily defense

mechanisms, namely fear and apathy. These people have buried their Ilya in his youth, under stacks of paper and job requirements.”

“Aha! You raise a fair point, Sasha,” returned Vanya. “I find them despicable; careerists or bootlickers, who have willingly yanked the curtain down over the grotesque carnival!”

“But...” someone began to murmur. “What of the alternative? Our Ilya has awoken, and we sit here wasting away, pumped full of drugs until we cannot speak... What sort of a life is that? Many among us are locked away for misplaced words, nothing more... No, I cannot call them despicable... They are not so different from us, Vanya.”

The days and weeks passed in a jerking, unsteady rhythm. Series of days could melt together, leaving one with the impression that only a few days had passed when in fact, two weeks had come and gone. Other times the days were protracted, drawn out. There were stretches when even our buoyant minds could not muster up the strength to penetrate the walls of our cell. Together with Vanya and Sasha I had managed to avoid the worst of what was on offer at the medication buffet, and though my mind had been damaged irreversibly I remained resilient, with a hand firmly planted on reality while many around us were doped further and further into a stupor, into a deep sleep from which it would be difficult to escape. They would either stay here until they wasted away, or reenter society years later, their memories dulled. There, they would return to regular jobs and posts. After going through hell, the everyday is greeted like an old friend.

“What you must realize is that there is no escape from hell and we’re knee deep.” Sasha blurted out one day. I was in the midst of an aminazine-induced daze and had forgotten had come before this, but I couldn’t rouse the energy to speak. “Even if,” Sasha continued, “We ever should be so fortunate as to leave this place, you can be sure that it will be close to impossible to assimilate back into regular society. Each time we go to try and find a job, the mark of a psychiatric history will follow us! Our opportunities will diminish. Doors will close and stay closed. No, there is no escape from hell. Our only hope is to destroy hell and hope with all our souls that what comes afterwards is better...”

What he meant by destroying hell was clear, but none of us could truly believe at that point that change was imminent in our country. We were only young, and already discovered by the authorities and tortured. Older generations were uninterested or unwilling to make a change now. Too many had been entrenched in Soviet life. They had no love for it, but a certain tolerance. And to be sure, there was little tolerance for the thought of upheaval and revolution, especially a bloody one. No one was keen to pick up arms again. The days passed in a jerking, unsteady rhythm.

Then, at a point, a singularly unusual event occurred. The nurse entered our room for what appeared to be her usual rounds, but she was accompanied by two orderlies, the doctor, and another man, wearing what you would expect a professor to wear. The doctor pointed to me and murmured something into the professor’s ear. The two orderlies immediately went to pull me out of my cot. I didn’t resist. I had lost considerable body and muscle mass over the past months and was too weak to even

consider what would be futile resistance. But the orderlies lifted me from my cot without their usual brute force, and their faces revealed no joy. The professor watched the scene with pursed lips, taking a mental note of everything he saw. It seemed immediately to me that this professor was important, and that the staff was trying their best to make a good impression on him. Our hospital troupe then made its way through the corridors of the facility. The orderlies led the way with me at the head of the group, followed closely by the nurse, with the doctor and professor taking up the rear. I quickly realized that the walk was taking longer than it took to get to any of the places I had already been. I had thought that we may have been going to the doctor's office, but we walked right past it into a section of the hospital I had never been to before. After about ten minutes the din of an audience began to emanate through the walls around me. A warm yellow light shone through a set of double doors which we were fast approaching. The orderlies pushed through the doors into a large auditorium, large enough to seat almost a thousand people. A hush descended on the audience as our troupe entered the room. The audience must have numbered several hundred. On the stage were a few chairs. The orderlies broke away from the troupe and remained behind by the doors while the nurse took over the role of escort. She sat me in the center chair, and the doctor and professor sat on either side of me. The professor looked around the room and began to speak.

“Good day and welcome to today's conference, where we will be discussing how to identify schizophrenia of the sluggish variety based on new recommendations from our country's most prominent psychiatrists. Today we will be hearing from the head doctor from OPH #15 and one of his patients, Vladimir, who is currently

undergoing treatment for the illness. We will begin with the doctor, who will explain a little bit about the case of this patient, and how he was able to determine the progression of the illness over the course of several weeks. Doctor?”

“Yes, thank you, Professor. Hello, and good day to my colleagues, and students of psychiatry. It is an honor to be here, and I hope you will find the following discussion useful... Vladimir was first admitted to our hospital ten weeks ago. When he first arrived, I had already received a recommendation from a colleague of mine that Walter may be suffering from schizophrenia of the simple, or sluggish variety, and my first task was to look for the characteristics, and personality traits that have been established in previous cases of the illness. From the moment he entered my office, Vladimir’s demeanor was nervous and suspicious. He was confused by many of my questions, which were quite straightforward. I asked him about his sleep, his social life, his fears. These are normal questions that I ask all of my patients on a regular basis. Even from this early point, his answers were filled with uncertainty, hesitation. I saw in his eyes a person who was unsure of himself on a fundamental level. Vladimir’s case is one I have seen many times before. A person who is unsure of the voice in his head; unsure of who is in control of his body. Trusting my instincts, I told him my diagnosis, and admitted him into my care. My instinct was confirmed when I next spoke with Vladimir. Immediately he withdrew into himself, showing signs of embitterment, and resistance to his diagnosis and treatment. He revealed signs of a persecution complex, believing truly that he did not belong in our care, and that society had wronged him. When asked if he thought sane people were held in psychiatric hospitals in this country, he resorted to silence tactics. In

Vladimir's case the signs revealed themselves over the course of just a few weeks. Luckily, we admitted Vladimir when we had the chance. Otherwise, his illness might have developed further in society, and we would have been responsible. But not all cases are like Vladimir's, and the symptoms may not reveal themselves for months, if not longer. You must cast a keen eye on every part of your patient's behavior! No characteristic should go unexplored, no quirk should be neglected from inquiry. The work you are doing is of paramount importance to your country! It is our duty to identify those who are suffering from this terrible illness and to help them. I will now take a few questions from the audience before we speak with Vladimir."

I could not see the audience, but several hands must have shot up, and the doctor began fielding questions. I sat silently, formulating some tactics for the questions the doctor would soon ask me. I sensed that he would ask many of the same questions that he had asked before and hoped that I would answer them as I had before. At this point I knew for sure that it was in my best interests to play along, to give him what he wanted, and hopefully expedite my liberation. To lash out now would be senseless, and would only end, as most things did, at the tip of another needle. However, I was still determined to give a good account of myself.

"Vladimir, tell us, when you first arrived, did you have worries about your future?"

"Yes, I have worried about my future, the same as anybody. I'm sure many of the students in this room would share my concerns about exams, applying to university... There are not so many good jobs available at the moment, only in low-

level manual labor. Higher education appears to be the best path for someone to take.”

There were some murmurs among the audience members. A few quiet laughs. The professor looked at the doctor, slightly amused. The doctor was smiling too, and in his smile I sensed two things. One, that I had given him the answer he had wanted, and two, that regardless of the answers I gave, they would not punish me. I realized once again that what I said was ultimately irrelevant, and everything would be put down to my illness. The only reason that I had been selected for the conference was because they knew that I wouldn't lash out in such a formal setting, and was one of the better spoken, more personable political patients. The doctor continued...

“No good jobs available? Those sound like the words of the western radio! Not like the words of a proud Soviet!”

“I can only comment based on my own experience, sir. Where I come from, Derbent, jobs are scarce, and the youth have no direction. What the western radio may or may not be saying is none of my concern.”

The professor interjected. “Let us suppose that you are correct, and that jobs are scarce. What steps do propose to solve this problem?”

“I am not so arrogant to believe I know the solution, but we must be willing to allow for open debate. For example, if multiple Communist parties would be allowed to compete for power, the benefits would be profound and immediate for millions of Soviet citizens.”

“Multiple parties? You realize that what you are saying is opposed directly to the ideas put forward by our leadership?”

“I don’t think it is anti-Soviet to care for my fellow countrymen! I can only comment on what I see with my own two eyes and believe in the openness of discussion for the prosperity of my country.” I tried to play up the patriotic aspect in my discussion and made sure to assert that I was arguing for multiple *Communist* parties, though any belief that such a change would be possible or successful, had long vanished. The doctor paused for a moment before addressing the audience.

“If I may... Here, students and colleagues, we see a typical symptom of the schizophrenia. The patient believes himself, and his ideas, to be of a value greater, to be more profound than they are in reality. Students among us should already be mentally checking the box labelled “megalomania.” Our Volodya here may not appear to be the sort that we usually associate with the term, but he is cut from the same cloth. Vladimir is proposing that the way that society is currently functioning is incorrect; this also coincides with his belief that he has been wrongly treated by this society, and that his hospitalization is unjust. What would you say to that, Vladimir?”

“I would only say that I do not think that I am mentally unhealthy, and that it appears to me that I have been declared mentally ill because of my ideas.”

“Yes,” interjected the doctor, “In my discussions with Vladimir I have discovered this misconception. The notion that society has singled him out, and that the thoughts he is having are normal, or healthy. They are not normal, Vladimir, let me assure you once again. Until you can acknowledge this fact it will be difficult for you to recover...”

These were the sorts of questions they asked, and these were the answers I gave. The whole conversation must have lasted about an hour, perhaps an hour and a

half at the most. Of all my discussion with the doctor, this one was the most civil, perhaps because he was under scrutiny from some superior who was writing a report on the event, but for the first time I also sensed some understanding in his eyes. I wouldn't go so far as to call it kindness or even pity, but for the first time I felt that the doctor looked at me without all the layers of superiority that pervaded our previous conversations. He must have been surprised at how resilient yet inoffensive I remained. My frankness in the intimidating setting of the conference must have been unusual, and unlike our previous talks, I never felt trapped in his clutches.

Now looking back, I cannot help but think back to the story of Spartacus and Crassus, the ballet that I had seen a few months prior. Here I was, held captive in Rome as Spartacus had been, with my own Crassus urging me to sell myself out, to fall upon my own sword. But throughout this conversation I did not bend to his will. My mind had recited each question and answer a million times over. Awake in my cot late at night, I had taken this conversation to each of its possible conclusions, until I got to a point where I could anticipate what he would next ask several questions in advance. My Crassus could find no chink in my armor for I wore none. I am not and never have been a warrior. Moreover, I was not looking for a fight, which made it difficult to pick one with me. I simply had my ideas, my poems, my mind, and my soul. You can take the sword away from a warrior; and even the pen from a poet, but the poem comes from the depths of the soul, not from the tip of a pen. And that's what was at stake here. I understood it even then, in a way, but now with exceptional clarity. We were not discussing whether or not I was suffering from schizophrenia, or any other illness. We were not discussing whether Soviet society could be improved

upon or my thoughts about it in general. We were discussing more simply, who was in charge of my mind; who was in charge of my soul. Was it me? or was it the Party.

All the boys here were imprisoned because they had shown signs of developing a soul, and we were to be treated until the symptoms of this “soul” made themselves scarce. The doctors had been handed the task and would spend their days tucked away in their offices, thinking of what to do with this pesky soul, before coming to the decision to increase the regular daily doses of aminazine. When the soul malfunctions, the whole body is affected; When people go on strike, hand out leaflets, or speak out in any way against the regime, the authority of the Soviet is put into question. The existence of these prison-hospitals can be put down to the question of how to dismantle, or otherwise subjugate the soul to the body. The individual, or the soul, was not to overtake the collective, or the body, under any circumstances. The soul could not hold power over the body, or the Union would be overrun with people claiming to have individual license, their minds pulling their bodies away from their posts at the levers and buttons of state machinery like construction workers abandoning their bulldozers. The soul, it was agreed, could not be allowed to do this; the body had to remain in control. And so, the discussion continued. The doctor asked me who was in charge of my soul, and I continued to reply that it was me who was in charge. Some students asked questions, and the conference finished. The nurse and orderlies walked with me back to my room.

5. Release, Voroshilovgrad and Kursk

I received five days' notice before I was released. The doctor had the final word.

“We believe that based on your recent response to insulin therapy you have shown a marked shift in your behavior and attitude. The nurses have made special note that you are no longer resistant to your treatment and take your medication willingly. They have also expressed that they believe you should be considered for discharge. I have seen a similar improvement in your behavior, Volodya, and I trust their judgement as well. I hope that you will take this opportunity that not every young boy here will receive, and that you will continue to change your behavior beyond the walls of our hospital, and reenter society with a newfound desire to be a useful and proud Soviet citizen.”

I simply sat and nodded my head. The consistent courses of aminazine had flattened my soul, and the insulin treatment had sucked the life from me. I was less talkative than ever. To get out of this place you had to keep quiet. Keep your head down and behave as best you could. Survival had to be put above all else. Of course, I was glad to be released, but the short notice allowed for little celebration. Perhaps the most devastating aspect of the hospital is not the drugs, cruel orderlies, or even the constant stress of the hospital environment, but the unknown length of ones stay. Indefinite imprisonment was an emotionally unbearable prospect, and we had been deprived of hope, and the simple ability to count the days down to freedom. When I

was told, five days before, that I would be released, it felt more like being kicked out than anything else. I had to quickly prepare myself for reentry into society.

My parents met me at the hospital gates. All things said it was a happy day, a relief. We took a taxi back to my uncle's apartment where we spent a few days, before returning to Derbent. At this point I was cautiously optimistic. I had forgotten how to be happy in the hospital, and after my release I was still afraid to be hopeful. It would take a full three years before I felt somewhat normal, but many more before I could experience happiness as I had once known it. I had been mistaken on two counts; my belief in people, and my love for my country. My eagerness to place trust in people who were no better than common street criminals, save for their uniforms, was a mistake that had been punished severely. I had wandered blindly into a thick fog which had blown away in an instant, leaving me in a forest full of twisted roots and sharp branches, searching for the way I had entered. The horizon was lost somewhere out beyond the forest, I knew that, but how far I would have to walk, and in which direction to catch a glimpse of it, was beyond me. I would spend the rest of my time in Russia in an intellectual and emotional fog. I felt the consequences of those one hundred and five days in #15 for years, if not my whole life. Those violations of my humanity, constant attacks on my mental stability, had changed me irreversibly.

After returning to Derbent, the first of Sasha's warnings came true; my psychiatric history followed me out through the gates of the hospital, and onto the plane with me to Derbent. I quickly discovered upon my return that news of where I had been had traveled quickly. Rumors were spreading through the members of our

community, especially among my extended family. At family gatherings I could sense in their faces that they knew my secret, and unlike my parents and siblings, they were unconcerned with the truth, and preferred whatever narrative they had constructed in their heads. I had never had good relationships with many of them before this, and now when they looked at me I felt more exposed than ever. I spent several months in Derbent recovering, but knew that I needed to leave my hometown, and the condescending gazes of those who knew my secret, as soon as possible. I needed a fresh start; to go to a place where I was unknown and attempt to reenter society. I would soon discover the impossibility of this simple need, but then I was still hopeful. I had to be hopeful. I asked my parents for money to buy a ticket.

My parents could only afford to give me a small sum, the equivalent of a couple hundred dollars. It was enough to get *somewhere*, and I ended up in Voroshilovgrad, near Donetsk in Ukraine. Through the local newspapers I quickly managed to track down a college where I could live in a dormitory for free. The college was accepting almost anybody at that point; it was a relatively new establishment and not many people had signed up for courses. I took art and entertainment classes for several months before I burnt out. The exams, which often played out like casting interviews, were unfulfilling and never led to any tangible feeling of success, neither in the form of a job, or even emotionally in a sense of fulfillment. Student life was also extremely isolating as the dormitory was nowhere near capacity. I was often one of the only students living on a floor that could comfortably hold thirty, and I felt that I could not open up to the students who were there in any way beyond small talk, because of the nature of my past. It was

inconceivable for me to discuss any part of my history or my interests with them, and everything that they found fun seemed to me childish, perhaps because I had been forced to grow up at such a young age. So, I dropped out, which meant, of course, that I had to find another place to stay. I picked up a job in construction and found new lodgings through a coworker. For a time, this went well. I had an income and was doing work that was straightforward and uninvolved. I preferred this type of work to office life with all its intricate power dynamics. Here it was simple. The foreman was in charge, and we, the workers, did as little work as we could while still meeting the deadlines he set. This went on for some time, almost a year and a half, but again I ran into the same problems as before. The workers were more mature than the students had been, but after work they would go out to drink, which I had no interest in, or home to their families, and I would be left alone in my room. Again, I quit.

My next job was in the suburbs of the same city. I found work on trains. Six months of classes and formal training were followed by another six months of hands-on experience, during which I worked on an overnight train from Voroshilovgrad to Kiev. I would take tickets, make announcements on the intercom, and serve tea and other beverages. I was part of a two-person team and we would each have twelve-hour shifts. It was tough work; the hours were long and there was always another task to complete. When I was not working I would attempt to sleep, but I usually worked the shift from midnight to noon, and my sleep schedule was completely thrown off. Nonetheless I completed the year program and received my certificate. I knew that

my body couldn't tolerate such work, however, and I made no attempt to continue in this field.

After this period in Ukraine I returned to Derbent. I had come no closer to finding a place in society where I felt comfortable. Back at home I began to write poetry seriously for the first time since before I had been imprisoned. I had spent the last four years on a grind and was already in my early twenties. My poetry began to draw more heavily from my life experience, my imprisonment and my jobs. Before I had written from my mind, from ideas and theories, but now my experience began to take hold. Around the same time, I began to work at a military factory where my father managed to get me a job. I continued here for a while, several months, working and writing. I even began to feel relatively at ease, and normal once again. Then, one day, I forgot my poetry book in the main employee lounge at the factory. When I realized my error and went to retrieve it, it had disappeared. A few days later my boss summoned me to his office. It began as a normal meeting.

“How are you doing Vladimir. How is your family? They are well, yes? Good, good... I've been looking over your supervisor's report, you've been working very well recently; if you keep it up for the next few months it will look very good when we come to the end of the business year...” Just normal, boss-talk. Then out of nowhere, *he* began to talk to me about politics.

“Though I can't promise you a raise for your high level of performance... You know how it is in this country; the same wages for the past twenty years! A strange place we live in...”

I was immediately on alert. This was very strange behavior. I had only known this man for a few months, and he felt comfortable speaking about politics with me? I found that very unlikely. I sensed, and later my suspicions were confirmed, that my notebook had been found by someone, and brought immediately to the KGB in Derbent. They had then asked the director to provoke me, to incite me to engage in a political discussion.

This was the point where my hope of integration ended, and a new hope began; to escape the country, but first the KGB. How I would leave the country I didn't yet know. It seemed impossible even in 1985, when peaceful protesting was still enough to get you swept away. Escaping the KGB was more straightforward, at first. Despite being one of the most expansive secret police networks in the world, the KGB could only follow so closely, because of the sheer size of the country. I fled Derbent within the week, travelling to Kursk, just north of Ukraine.

For almost two years I managed to evade them in Kursk, working construction, and staying with a young teacher who I had met through the local college, where I took a few courses. Unfortunately, she eventually became unhappy with our arrangement. I offered to pay more for continuing to live with her, but she wouldn't have any of it. She never threatened to call the authorities on me, but I knew that it was well within her power, and I decided to leave voluntarily. I was left in a tricky situation; housing was hard to come by, and I couldn't find work that would provide lodging. After exploring my options, I eventually came to the conclusion that I would have to go to the local authorities to attempt to secure a place to live. It was either that, or return to Derbent, where the authorities knew my name. I had hoped

that my name had not made it through the bureaucratic pipelines here to Kursk yet, or that my consistently held job and up-to-date papers would reduce suspicion.

And so, I went to the local authorities. The one thing I had not expected, or realized, was that I was clearly not from Kursk, or anywhere in Russia for that matter. My appearance is, and has always been, closer to Turkic than ethnic Russian. Soon into our conversation the man behind the counter asked me where I was from. Not thinking, I told him Derbent. I have never been concerned with my ethnicity; it has never been a source of self-pride. But unfortunately, those around me were, and I walked into a building in Moscow, Petersburg, or in this case, Kursk, I was bound to be singled out, and asked to explain myself further than others had to. I explained that there was not as much work to be found in Derbent, and that I had moved up to Kursk a few years back. I presented my papers, fully in order. He must have given a signal to one of his colleagues, before continuing to talk with me for twenty minutes, even going so far in his charade as to explain potential housing options that had recently come up. Meanwhile, his friend was busy calling up the KGB in Derbent to see what I was up to, here in Kursk. Two burly men came in through the main entrance and pounced on me. I was lead outside, where a shiny black Volga was already waiting. The two KGB men sat with me in the back as we drove through Kursk to the KGB headquarters in the city. As it turned out, the KGB had lost track of me as soon as I had left Derbent, and they weren't too pleased. I was brought into the director's office.

“Welcome, Vladimir. Did you really think you could escape us indefinitely? Well, let's make up for lost time. I will not mince words. You will tell us exactly the

levels of your personal interest in politics, any groups or organizations you are a part of, and your plans for the future.”

I sat in silence for a few moments. I sensed that something like this might happen, but those fears are never realized until you're face-to-face with the agent of your terror. I thought about what I would tell him. I knew I needed to avoid torture. My body had suffered enough.

“Don't bother with the silence tactics, Vladimir. We have your poems, we know your history in the psychiatric facility, and the reasons you were put there. If you wish to make things difficult, we have every tool at our disposal, and let me assure you, they are all plenty sharp.”

I quickly began to talk. Anything but torture. Frankly, there was little more to tell than what he already knew. I was not a member of any group or secret society. And my poems, well, he already knew about them. I told him that yes, I had written poetry but that it was personal; I had not attempted publication in *samizdat* or distributed it in any way.

“Ah, yes. Okay. We will see about all that. For now, you will stay here with us.”

The cell I was put into was large, with a high ceiling. It could clearly hold up to sixty people, but it was just me and one other inmate, who I quickly realized was working for them. He would ramble on with the most generic anti-Soviet rhetoric conceivable. *Oh, how much I hate them! Those rat Communists! I spit on their Lenin!* I feigned ignorance and got the idea to use their inside man against them, to show them that I was no threat. He continually asked me whether I was a member of an anti-Soviet

group, or demonstrations, and I simply replied truthfully that I wasn't. He visibly became bored with me, and after a few days he disappeared from the cell. I was told he had been transferred to another prison, and it was probably true; he had gone somewhere else to ply his trade. After he was gone I was alone in the cavernous cell.

However, I soon began to hear a voice through the wall, and when I cupped my ear on just the right part I could hear a man speaking with reasonable clarity. I began to attempt contact, and for a day or two, I spoke with this man through the wall. He sounded older, his voice was rough, and he had a wheeze. He asked me if I was going to get out soon, and if I did get out, if I could tell his mother where he was. Of course, I agreed, what else could I say? His voice was sad, and hopeless. It didn't seem like there were any plans for his release. A KGB officer entered my cell and began to beat me.

"What's going on here?! Talking with the others, eh?" The beating was swift, and I was brought once again before the director.

"What business do you have communicating with other inmates? Do you have any idea who you were speaking to? Why risk your own freedom to help someone you don't know?" I sat quietly, explaining that I hadn't agreed to help him, and that I was only looking for conversation. He appeared not to hear me.

"Are you familiar with the swallow technique? No? Well, let me explain it very clearly. We'll handcuff your hands behind your back above your head. Then we'll hang you up from the ceiling, on a hook. There you will hang suspended for a while. I've heard that it's quite painful. No, not kind on the back at all..." My face must have revealed my fear, and the director began to laugh.

“Alright, back to your cell for now...”

A few more days passed, and as it happened, I was not tortured. After ten days in the KGB prison, I was awakened in the morning to learn that I was being transferred to another jail, where I would stay for another twenty days. They could hold me legally for a full month without pressing any charges, and clearly, they intended to keep me in custody for the full month. Again, I was escorted into the slick black Volga.

The situation that awaited me at the second jail was completely unlike the one I had been in before. I found here a small cell filled far beyond capacity with men. These were bums and alcoholics, addicted to drugs or otherwise rejected by society. The cell was at most, nine feet wide, and a little shorter in the other dimensions. There were almost ten of us crammed into this tiny area; there was barely enough space to lie down. No beds, no mattresses, no benches. It was summertime, so we didn't need blankets, but I have no doubt that they would not have been provided even in the winter. One corner was taken up by a bucket, which we all used as a toilet. To sleep we all lay on the wooden floor of the cell, huddled closely to one another, like herrings in a tin can. Each day we made a tea substitute using burnt bread and water, and the meals were meager. Conversations were our only luxury during the restless nights, though I remember little of those twenty days. There was no way to keep track of time since each day was identical to the last. I left that detention center with nothing more than a general sense of poverty, of people beaten down by society economically and spiritually. Their lot in life had been poor, and circumstances had taken their toll.

The teacher who I had been staying with in Kursk had found out about what had happened to me and felt guilty for her role in my imprisonment. She helped me get

out, dry cleaned my clothes which were infested with fleas; got me back onto my feet. We both knew, however, that it wasn't safe for me to remain in Kursk, and she paid for my ticket back to Derbent.

By then I was in my mid-twenties. Almost a decade had passed since I had been in #15, and still the KGB wasn't leaving me alone. I learned after my return to Derbent that while I was in Kursk they had continually come to my parents' house to try and find me. Each time I felt close to reintegration my history prevented me from doing so, and the KGB disrupted me at every step. I saw no future for myself here. More and more, Russia felt like a false motherland, and I could no longer bring myself to imagine a life in this country. The only way I could achieve anything in life was if I left this place, and I began searching for a route. Ideally, I wanted to take a legal path to freedom. I would only resort to escape in the literal sense of the word if this proved impossible.

I was on the lookout. I listened to the foreign radio more intently and figured out what I could from the newspapers about the political climate. In fact, I got lucky with the timing, as while I had travelled between Ukraine, Kursk, and Derbent, Brezhnev had died, and Gorbachev had taken control of the country. Of course, hindsight tells us that the Union was on the way down, but even by 1986 that fact wasn't clear. What we did know even then, however, were his now famous words: glasnost, and perestroika, openness and reconstruction. In truth, few of the changes made in Moscow made their way to Derbent, almost two thousand miles away, until the Union had already collapsed, but one key change was of special interest to the Jewish community in Derbent. The rumors began circulating in the late 80s that

Gorbachev and the Party were preparing to give out increased visas through the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which was meant to make it easier for non-Orthodox Christians, and Jews to leave the Soviet Union. This amendment had been quite successful when it was first signed in 1974, and thousands of Jews had left for Israel and America, but the numbers of visas had declined in the 80s. Gorbachev, it was rumored, was preparing to restore the legitimacy of the document to its original level.

The Jewish community in Derbent took hold of this rumor with all their hearts and listened ever more keenly to the radio. I too listened, sensing that this was my opportunity to escape. When it began to fall into place, it happened suddenly, and in a way that I did not fully grasp until later. One day I got a letter in the mail from Israel. It was a man who claimed to be a relative of mine. I forget exactly who he claimed to be—perhaps a thrice-removed uncle, or a long-lost cousin. All that mattered was that he said he was my relative, and that he was inviting me to come to Israel. In reality, of course, he wasn't related to me; this had been an organized effort by Jewish organizations to get Jews out of the Soviet Union. These groups had enlisted the help of Jews in many countries, but primarily in Israel, to send these letters to Russian Jews. Once you received this letter, all you needed to do was take the letter through the appropriate bureaucratic channels, and you would be given a visa and allowed to leave. In essence, this letter was a route to attain a visa.

This process felt an upswing in 1989 as uncertainty in the Union grew, and I was among the first in Derbent to receive one of these letters. My whole family was relieved. The shadow that the KGB cast over me, and all of them by proxy, was taxing and stressful. My parents were law-abiding people, and when three KGB

agents made a habit of showing up at their door to ask for their son's whereabouts, it put the whole family on edge. Moreover, they understood very well that it was impossible for me to remain in Russia.

And so, in early 1990 I returned to Moscow with the letter from my Israeli "uncle" in hand. I had not been to Moscow since I had been imprisoned there twelve years ago, and I immediately felt the memory of #15 rushing back when I arrived. More than ever I felt the inquisitive glances of each passerby. I was far behind enemy lines, and the streets that had previously tempted me with their sense of adventure now lost their allure. Each side street in the sprawling city posed new dangers, new uncertainties. The stoic faces of the statues I had marveled at before no longer surveyed the horizon, at the imagined future of a country that was quickly falling apart. They now stared directly at me, through me, into my subconscious. *We know all about you, Volodya.*

When I arrived in the district of Moscow where foreign embassies had arranged themselves, I discovered a huge mass of people. Well, not quite a mass – the Muscovite myriapod had organized itself into a number of smaller hordes, which rooted themselves at the entrances to embassies, and flowed around corners and into streets. The American embassy had by far the longest line in front of it. I knew that I wanted to go to America more than anywhere else, but I didn't care where I ended up, and Israel would do just fine, for now. However, I had determined to take initiative and go to the American embassy myself to inquire about the possibility of going there directly, but the queue was thousands of people long, and policemen positioned themselves incrementally along the line. This was enough to put me off. I was afraid

even to approach, lest one of the policemen asked to see my visa and discovered I was in the wrong line. I feared that they might check who I was, and either put me back into a KGB detention center as they had in Kursk, or worse, readmit me into a psychiatric hospital. I couldn't risk that.

And so, I went to the Israeli embassy. There were relatively few people here, no more than a hundred. I waited in line, and just like that, my letter had been verified and I had been given a visa. I paid twenty-five rubles for a plane ticket that usually cost three thousand. A formality. *Come back when you're ready to leave.* I left the embassy to see hordes of people protesting outside. Apparently, I was lucky; many other Jews had not been given visas despite having the letter. I returned to Derbent and two weeks later, I came back with my luggage.

It was an early flight. There were no direct planes to Tel Aviv, so we were going to stop over for a night in Budapest. The plane pulled up to the terminal and we all boarded. There was a large group of us, eighty to one hundred people, who were with a few Israeli representatives. It was overcast; it had rained overnight, and a dense fog had fallen over the runway. Our plane sat on the tarmac as the pilots waited for the fog to clear. Around midday the sun began to peek through, and the engines began to rumble. We shot off down the runway, and I closed my eyes and lay back in my seat. All at once the plane separated from the tarmac and floated upward into the clouds. Perfect weightlessness. Somewhere thirty thousand feet below the border flashed by in the blink of an eye.

Epilogue

Vladimir Irmiyahev lived in Israel for five years. He changed his Russian surname to the Hebrew spelling, Yirmiyahu, on arrival. He spent his first six months in a kibbutz, where he learned the Hebrew language, before spending a year in a yeshiva, a Jewish religious school. He then worked as a security guard and spent a small period of time in the army. Vladimir found that Israel was closer to a “motherland” than Russia, but quickly realized that it was not, as he understood it, a free country. Free speech, corruption, and the treatment of Arabs as second-class citizens were the main problems that Vladimir had with Israeli democracy, and he was unwilling to make Israel his final destination. After years of trying, he won the green card lottery in 1994, and arrived at JFK one year later, in 1995. He has lived in New York City ever since. Once settled in America, he changed his name to Walter Kin.

Part II: Walter

Link to the Film

LINK

<https://vimeo.com/aakp/walter>

PASSWORD FOR ACCESS

“Derbent”

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