

Andrei Shkarubo

*Untrodden
paths*

or philosophy of Russian political system



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Аннотация

The story takes place in a psychiatric hospital 50 km. east of Moscow in the summer of 1985, at the start of Gorbachev's perestroika, and focuses on the philosophy and practice of the Russian political system.

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Andrei Shkarubo**

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Untrodden paths

By Andrei Shkarubo

Dedicated to those who, in their quest for Truth, pass through Death

From the author: The author is in no way responsible for the politically incorrect actions and words of the characters in his play: it takes place in a psychiatric hospital 50 km. east of Moscow in the summer of 1985, at the start of Gorbachev's perestroika.

To those who might view the plot as contrived and unrealistic, saying that people, finding themselves in a psychiatric hospital, are unlikely to spend their time debating at length the complex issues of philosophy, our being, and politics; thinking that in a psychiatric hospital these people are likely to be preoccupied with their own problems and sorrows, rather than the problems of the whole mankind – the author would like to remind those that the characters of his play are not normal healthy members of society, but personalities whose minds are thought to be seriously affected – which is evident from their painful, obsessive, pathological drive toward some alleged Truth; indifference toward their own fate and wellbeing; and finally total disregard for authority and state.

Gentlemen, and former comrades, too, please, be patient with

my characters – they are sick people, besides, they are living in Russia – the country where the questions «who's to blame?» and «what to do?» are inherent.

Act 1

morning in the ward – «Spy»

Bachkov, a tall, athletic, handsome male nurse in his mid-thirties: Wake up, wake up, you loonies! Everybody here, get up, get dressed, make your beds, wash your f-f-f-asses. Voronin, stop jerking off and start the floor scrub!

Voronin, a man in his mid-thirties: I ain't jerkin' off, I'm playing morning tattoo.

Imitates the sound of a bugle.

A general laugh, then someone: He won't get up till his cock gets down!

Bachkov: Grab that broom and play scrubbing tattoo, instead.

Voronin, giving a loud raspberry, causing more laughter: Sorry, Captain, but scrubbing ain't like jerkin' off; it has to be done in turns.

Bachkov: Whose turn is it, then?

Voronin: See this new loony, in the corner?

Bachkov: Are you Andrei, the one police brought in yesterday evening?

Andrei, a young man of 27: Yes.

Bachkov, giving an amused whistle: I've just read your case story, is it rue? They say...

Andrei: Never mind what they say, watch what they do...

Bachkov: Really? Well, frankly, it's none of my business because I've seen enough to mind my own. Anyway, Mr. Spy, today seems to be your turn to scrub. Here's a bucket and a mop for you.

(Sound of scrubbing)

Sasha, a young man of 27 with a guarded look characteristic of an ex-con, watching inexperienced scrubbing movements, asks quietly: First time here?

Andrei: Not exactly, I was in the institution before, four years ago, in fact.

Sasha: What for?

Andrei: American embassy...

Sasha: Wanted to emigrate?

Andrei: Not exactly, it's a long story....

Victor, a handsome man of 45 with piercing shiny eyes: That's what our gaga-houses are for: To cut our long stories short. As I understand it, once you're on the KGB's black list, your stays here are bound to become regular: a party Congress, Good-Will Games, or a Youth Festival, like now, and they round up all subversive elements which might spoil their fun.

Sasha: Yeah, man, you should have gone to some safe place before this fucking festival began.

Andrei: I didn't know that. I thought – in fact I was assured – that if I laid low and kept quiet I would be left alone, unnoticed and forgotten.

Victor: Boy, you must be really naïve to trust what they say. It's not in their interests to forgive and forget. They live by suppression.

Andrei: Why? Is it in their interests to increase the number of their enemies?

Victor: Friends and enemies are the notions which belong to the rosy world of Romance. The shady world of politics knows only «useful and useless». And if you should happen to be of any use to them, they label you as friend or enemy, depending on the way they want to exploit you. It doesn't matter for them which side you're on, as long as you play by the rules of the game.

Andrei: How's that?

Victor: Whatever team you play for there's only one goal in this ball game.

Tupikov, a portly man in his sixties, grinning: Victor Vasilyevich is a philosopher, got here because of it.

Victor: No, I'm not a philosopher. I used to practice yoga, until my enlightenment, then I wrote a book – and here we are...

Tupikov: Now psychiatrists are busy writing the review. After which, unless the author shuts up, the «publisher» would pay him lavish royalties, which you, Victor Vasilyevich, would be at pains to enjoy, say, in Sychevka, or in Kazan's life ward.

Victor: Well, Nikolai Ivanovich, I've never shied away from the graces of our high and mighty. Besides, one can write in Kazan too.

Andrei and Sasha laugh.

Sasha: Victor, they'll give you such hell for your ravings you won't know how to read, much less write.

Victor: If I remember correctly, Porfiry Ivanov was able to write his things when they locked him in Kazan psychiatric prison.

Sasha: Who's that?

Victor: A Russian healer, a yogi.

Tupikov: Victor Vasilyevich, Ivanov, being a yogi and a healer, never meddled in politics.

Sasha: A pal of mine returned from Kazan recently. He says the guy who tried to shoot Brezhnev in Red

Square is still in solitary. The guys there have tried repeatedly to pass him cigarettes at least, but the coppers never let them.

Andrei, surprised: Is he still there? It's been over twenty years since he...

Sasha: What did you expect? It's a life ward...

The somber mood was broken by Bachkov reappearing in the doorway: Hey, loafers, breakfast time!

With a joyous cry Voronin leaps from his cot. In the doorway he receives from Bachkov a kick in the ass, so hard it might have knocked anyone else down, but Voronin just gave another loud raspberry and raced to the dining hall, reciting on the way children's verses «I'm a jolly little cloud mistaken for a bear. I'm a jolly little cloud, floating here and there...»

The rest, smiling, leave the ward slowly, leaving behind only Victor Vasilyevich and Andrei, who went on scrubbing.

Andrei: Why don't you go?

Victor: I take my meals only once a day.

Andrei: Oh, yes, you are a yogi. I myself have been practicing yoga for 15 years already. I've read lots of books on it, and on the occult in general.

Victor: Really? In our country one can get these books only by samizdat. You have a chance to get such literature?

Andrei: No, I just happen to know English and spend a lot of time in the library of foreign literature in Moscow.

Victor: I see: a second language is a second life.

Andrei: Frankly, what I wanted to say is that I don't know what a person could write about yoga to land him in a psychiatric hospital.

Victor: First of all, there are lots of things about yoga which the authorities would like to keep secret from the public, mostly things which concern mind control. That's actually why the occult department was formed inside the KGB.

Andrei: Really? Well, on the other hand, why not – bearing in mind that there's no hole in the country they won't stick their nose in.

Victor: Of course, they do. How else can you explain the fact that all our underground groups in yoga, martial arts, and esoterica in general are controlled by the KGB, sometimes even guided?

Andrei: You mean they are hiding more from the public than

from the authorities?

Victor: Of course!

Andrei: And their goal – control and modification of conduct?

Victor: This too. You seem to know the issue and catch on fast.

Andrei: Yes, I read a few reports on similar CIA programs and occult sects created in the US for those purposes. It's hard to hide such things in a democratic country with its Freedom of Information Act.

But what did you write about this to cause the KGB to send you here?

Victor: Nothing yet. They sent me here for creating a new dialectics and using it in analyzing the present political situation as well as for giving forecasts for the future that warn about the complete disintegration of our political system – which they, for some reason, call communist – and for warning about the consequences which might take place if the regime, clinging to power, should resort to methods of control and manipulation of the public mind.

Andrei: I see. But how are your dialectics related to yoga? It seems to me that dialectics is part of philosophy.

Victor: It's directly related.

Andrei: Excuse my pestering you; it takes me a while to understand things; but I still don't understand what yoga and dialectics have in common, and what forecasts one can give on the basis of dialectics?

It seems to me the best thing it can help us do is to explain

processes and phenomena – post factum at that.

Whereas the things we are witnessing here and now, to say nothing of the future, either have no explanation or those explanations are similar to the claptrap of our scientific communism: I mean its theory lacks a scientific approach, while what we have in real life, in practice, can be defined as neither socialism, nor communism.

Victor: Yeah, foolishness in theory is fascism in practice. That's why I created the new dialectics: the maxims of the old one are no longer adequate to understand the modern picture of the world. So I significantly extended their number, and gave them a deeper contemporary interpretation, assembling them all into a single analytical model, methodology.

Andrei: Where did you get those missing maxims from, and the model itself?

Victor: See, that's where yoga and dialectics are linked. As you know, yoga studies not just our body, but our mind as well.

Andrei: Sure.

Victor: The whole of our logic, all of our theories, are based on maxims – notions, concepts, judgments – which to our mind seem self-evident and therefore do not require any proof.

Andrei: Yeah; so?

Victor: It's yoga which showed me in practice that our minds can vary significantly and the picture of our perception is rather conditional and always relative, being the function of speed, or frequency, of our perception.

Andrei: Beg your pardon?

Victor: Let's say if you want to study the work of the wings of a bumble-bee hanging over a flower, your eyes would be useless there: the speed of the wings' movements is incomparable faster than the speed of your perception; therefore the perceived picture is appropriately chaotic; the understanding of the perceived is nil.

But as soon as the speed, frequency, of your perception begins to approach the speed, frequency, of the wings' movement – no matter whether it's due to yogic training, or you just film it using a high-speed video recorder – then with the growth of the speed of perception, you begin to make out of general chaos, to distinguish certain elements, episodes.

The problem at this stage, though, is that while you're detecting one thing, you can't detect any other; there's simply no time for this.

This, incidentally, is the gnostic cognitive cause of all our conflicts: one catches a glimpse of one thing; another, of something else, its opposite, which provokes a dispute, often aggravating into a conflict, in which, sooner or later, the truth is born: that is, a third party emerges which initially disproves, if not defeats, both, then brings them together by producing a new integrated vision and explaining the faults of the old rivals. It's possible, though, only if the speed of perception of this third party equals the speed of the process under study. The picture of perception will be static only in this case.

Andrei: Static?

Victor: Sure. It's as if you were driving a car and caught up with a train going in the same direction. At this moment you'd be static relative to each other, and the picture perceived by you would be static and whole. That is, you'd be able to see all the elements of the picture at once, with all their interrelations; in other words, you'd see and you'd comprehend.

Andrei: Still, I don't quite follow where these additional maxims would come from.

Victor: As I said, they come from a higher level of consciousness and, appropriately, higher speed of perception. While prior to me the only thing they could detect was, say, that the bumble-bee's wings move up-and-down, I can make out and take into account such things as frequency of their movements, their amplitude, their angular and linear speed, and lots of other factors which, if considered, could both explain and predict any maneuver – whereas for an ordinary eye such maneuvers would seem just chaotic.

Andrei: The analogy is more or less plain. But the issue itself hasn't become any clearer. Besides, frequency, amplitude, speed are the notions of physics, not philosophy.

Victor: Quite right! It's only too natural that our material world obeys the laws of physics. Our social relations, too, can be modeled and calculated the way they model and calculate, say, the trajectory of a spacecraft.

Andrei, finishing his scrubbing and wringing out mop, remarks

with bitter irony: So your work is actually a new edition of a dialectical materialism, isn't it? Why did they lock you up then, for furthering

Marxism-Leninism?

Bachkov popped in: Finished? Hurry up or you may miss your breakfast.

Andrei: It's Ok, we haven't finished our talk yet.

Victor, smiling: You'd better go. A stomach stuffed with oatmeal is better than a head swollen with my ravings.

Andrei: Why so?

Victor: With oatmeal, you only risk spending your time in the toilet, with my ravings – time in a psychiatric hospital.

Andrei: OK, I'm going, just want to remind you that we are already there.

Scene in the mess-hall – amnesia

An empty mess-hall. Andrei, getting his bowl of porridge and a cup of chocolate, sits close to Sasha, who's already had his meal and is now waiting impatiently for something.

Andrei: Had your breakfast?

Sasha: Uh-huh.

Andrei: Won't you go to get your medicine?

Sasha: Later. The boys in the kitchen are making chifir (*a strong tea brew used as a mild narcotic*).

Andrei: I see.

Nodding at Sasha's forearm: You've got a beautiful rose tattooed on your forearm. So simple and so delicate.

Sasha: Yeah, I had a real artist for a cellmate in Smolensk.

Andrei: You were in Smolensk prison? What for?

Sasha: Burglary.

Andrei: Locked in a psychiatric ward?

Sasha: They did it later. I didn't quite get along with the administration, you know.

Andrei: Refused to snitch?

Sasha: Yes. So they certified me, and put in a ward, with a gorilla for a male-nurse. He was serving his time there for rape and murder. Honest thieves wouldn't take this job, you know. So as soon as I got there he tried to use me for his bum-boy. I wasn't a match for him physically, so I knifed him twice in the throat. The bastard survived by a sheer miracle, and I got me another eight years, this time for attempted murder.

Andrei: How old are you?

Sasha: 27.

Andrei: So am I.

Sasha: 27 and half of my life behind the bars. Do you know how it all started? When I was a kid, I stole a loaf of white bread – a fucking loaf of bread – they feed it to pigs here.

Andrei: Oh, now I see why the nurse here was searching the boys leaving the mess-hall. They are rationing bread. I guess Victor, our philosopher, is right: this regime cares more for pigs than for men; besides, the more convicts they have, the cheaper

the labor force.

Sasha: Yes, though sometimes he talks such nonsense!

Voronin approaches the counter with his bowl, shouting: I want more porridge!

Bachkov: What you want is an extra shot of aminazine and a kick in the ass! Lay off, you, glutton.

Voronin (sounding threatening): If you kick me in the ass I won't even know it. If I kick you in the ass, no one would be able to tell your shit from this porridge.

General laughter.

I'm a tiger, I'm a tiger, living in snow-capped mountains... Just mark my words, you, ha-ha-ha (*low rasping sound*).

(*Then extremely sweet, addressing Andrei*): Excuse me, could I have a piece of your bread, please?

Andrei: Sure, help yourself.

Voronin: Thank you, buddy. Know the story about a soldier and general? An orderly brings in a newly washed and pressed tunic to his general and asks him «How come you, comrade general, were so careless yesterday evening?»

Sasha: Get lost, you, bastard, or I'll cram my spoon into your stupid mouth!

Voronin laughs and walks away, singing: «Among untrodden mountain paths there's one that's mine...»

Sasha: God, that pesky loony can really drive me mad.

Andrei: Well, I wouldn't be so positive about his diagnosis. I passed the forensic psychiatry examination during my first term

and saw enough nutty guys who, after they were certified, did the coolest things to make a break.

Bachkov: It doesn't matter much here whether this zany is really mad or not. He's shot dosages that no man – sane or crazy – could take. Though, what really puzzles me, boys, is that it doesn't have any noticeable effect on him. The only visible change in those three months since they brought him here is that he has gained some weight. And he has become more garrulous; his mouth won't shut for hours.

Andrei: What did they put him in for?

Bachkov: Amnesia. He was brought by a patrol, found wandering in a nearby closed garrison with a Nikon camera in his attaché-case and an expensive illustrated edition of Pushkin. But no identity papers whatever. According to him, he's called Valeri Voronin, and he used to live in Petropavlovsk.

Andrei: So what's the problem? No relatives?

Bachkov: The problem is that there are two Petropavlovsk, one is in Kamchatka peninsular, the other is in

Kazakhstan. Judging by his raving accounts, he seems to know both, but when you start asking about his background, his ravings become too kaleidoscopic to figure out anything. Well, in any case the local shrinks diagnosed him as a friendly, non-violent type who could be kept in our asylum. So, we've got to put up with this Winnie the Pooh.

Andrei, with a laugh: He looks like a bear, all right. And I suspect has got his strength, too.

Bachkov: Frankly, boys, it's none of my business who the hell he is. He plays his part and I play mine. I've seen enough to mind my own business, and not to nose in somebody else's.

Departing, to Andrei: Get your dosage after breakfast and you may enjoy yourself in the garden till dinnertime.

Scene in the yard – Dialectics

Sound of chirping birds.

Out in the yard, Andrei notices a young man stripped to the waist working out with a dumb-bell not far from the porch. He approaches him and asks: Twenty?

Tsvetochkin: What?

Andrei: Twenty kilos?

Tsvetochkin: Yep.

Andrei: Do they allow it?

Tsvetochkin put the dumb-bell on the ground: Of course, not, well, not officially, anyway. The boys brought it so we could exercise on the sly. We hide it in the lilac bushes afterwards. Want to try?

Andrei: Sure.

Tsvetochkin commenting on Andrei's vigorous jerks: Well, boy, you are in good shape. Unfortunately, I can't use full force, my ribs are still aching.

Andrei: Why?

Tsvetochkin: Cops broke three of my ribs.

Andrei: Did you get here in the festival sweep too?

Tsvetochkin: No, I had problems with our local police inspector.

Andrei: Where are you from?

Tsvetochkin: Do you know the 37th kilometer commune?

Andrei: Yes.

Tsvetochkin proudly: Have you ever heard the name of Tsvetochkin?

Andrei: Harry Tsvetochkin?

Tsvetochkin: Yes.

Andrei: Never heard it, but I did see it. This name is sprayed in large letters on a wall of a shed near the railroad. Whenever I go by in a commuter train I see: Harry Tsvetochkin. Did you spray it?

Tsvetochkin: No. Boys did it. You see we used to work out there with the dumb-bells. As I proved to be the local strongman, the boys sprayed my name in red letters on the wall.

Andrei: And what was the problem with your local inspector?

Tsvetochkin: Well, his daughter began frequenting our shed.

Andrei with a laugh: Got interested in the sport too?

Tsvetochkin: Yes, if you call sex a sport. Her daddy tried to disband us a couple of times, and threatened to tear off my head and everything beneath. I told him to bugger off because no one was dragging his precious babe there by force. Well, a week later they picked me up at my work place, put in a car and drove to the police department for what they call «questioning».

Somebody had stolen the wheels off somebody's car, so they said it was me, and punched me in the teeth to facilitate, as they put it, a «Gorbachev's consensus» – to make me confess, I mean. I countered the bastard who hit me with my right, in the teeth too. He went down like a log, hitting the keys with the back of his head, they had the keys stuck in their safe. Well, in short, he got his head fractured and the whole mob went mad and started punching and kicking me, breaking three of my ribs, then they threw me in solitary where I developed lung edema, and the pleura became detached from the beating.

Well, they got scared I would die on their hands, so they offered me money: Take it, they said, and keep your mouth shut, or else; we'll take you to a hospital as a mugging victim we picked up in the street.

Andrei: So what did you do?

Tsvetochkin: Refused, of course. I won't look at this scum, much less make deals with them. Too bad I didn't kill that bastard.

Andrei: Well, I'm afraid you're too harsh on them. They didn't cheat you with the hospital, anyway. They mistook emergency for psychiatry, though; but you can't expect police to know who treats heads and who treats, say, asses.

Tsvetochkin smiles: How can they, indeed, if you can't tell their heads from their asses?

Andrei: How did you survive, incidentally? Lung edema is a serious thing. Did they treat you here?

Tsvetochkin: They did, with aminazine, just like everyone here. I survived because I heal easily like a dog.

Andrei: I see; I'm pretty much a survivor too. Where shall I put this dumb-bell?

Tsvetochkin: Over there, in the bushes behind the bench. Would you like to play chess or dominos?

Andrei: Naah, any brain use is strictly proscribed for me by the authorities. I'd much rather sun-bathe in the bushes.

Tsvetochkin: OK, then.

Andrei, approaching a bench among lilac bushes on which Victor Vasilyevich, stripped to the waist, is sunbathing: May I?

Victor: Sure, enjoy yourself, if labor therapy is not for you.

Andrei: I'm not inclined to work for the communists, besides they won't risk letting me out. Frankly, I'm surprised they let me out in the garden.

Victor: They let everyone out in the garden here. Unless you are strapped to your bunk, of course.

Andrei: Well, that's a comfort. By the way, I've thought of your new and the Hegelian old dialectics. How do they exactly differ? You've said you just added maxims there...

Victor: Caught a philosophic fever in the nuthouse?

Andrei: No, I was just wondering: If you really created a universal methodology, it would actually mean a revolution of our minds, because methodology is a kind of a universal key used for deciphering, the key which could change our whole outlook. Isn't that so?

Victor: Yes, though I'd compare it to a grammar, a syntax: If you do not know its rules, you won't understand the language, even if you know the meaning of every word. That's one thing; the other is that, more importantly, having changed our world outlook, this methodology will change out attitude toward the world.

As for differences, it differs from the old one not so much by a greater number of new notions and maxims as by a newer and more detailed interpretation of the old ones, ranging from conditionality and relativity of all notions and maxims, like: the unity and struggle of the opposites; a shift of quantity into quality and negation of negation – all this may be true under certain conditions with certain points of reference, and not true in others.

The old dialectics has none of this, nor has it a universal measure for various processes and phenomena.

Andrei: Wait a minute, how can there be a universal measure in this extremely diverse material world?

Victor: There can be and is! We are simply attracted and confused by the superficial visible diversity of the world, the variety of its forms. Prying into its content, its essence, is boring and unattractive. Nonetheless, this world has one feature in common which serves both as a reference point and a universal measure: it's

Time.

Andrei: Time?

Victor: Sure. As you know, everything in this world changes,

everything flows. Therefore, the only universal measure there can possibly be is Time.

The fact that the old dialectics explain the developments and processes by the struggle of opposites which have a common root; the fact that this struggle is perceived, first, as a quantitative change, growth, then as a qualitative shift; that during this struggle a negation of negation takes place, and contradictions are eliminated – all this shows that we are dealing not with a methodology, but a universal description, because there is no universal measure in it.

Appropriately, the practical value of such description is rather limited, actually close to nil. Because the world description is nothing but a sketch, a diagram, whereas methodology is a map which has its scale, points of reference, or cardinal points, and its set of signs.

With such a map in your hand, you can find your position in space by aligning the cardinal points and finding a match between the signs on the map and the actual objects in the field. The ability to take measurements means that you can answer the crucial questions: not just what direction do we go in, but where exactly do we go? What do we have yet to pass, and when? What obstacles do we have to overcome, and how long will it take us? No draft, no universal description, would answer those questions.

Andrei: Well, I understand your analogy. But it applies to space, it's hard to comprehend how Time can be the universal measure in such a case.

Victor: Don't we measure cosmic space by light years?

Andrei: Well, that's the Cosmos...

Victor: Don't we measure the distance to a nearby bus-stop or a kiosk by how many minutes it takes us to walk there?

Andrei: Sure, but we imply an average distance that we cover in a minute. Besides, one can compare only things of the same quality. Space and Time are totally different entities which, as far as I know, have not even been precisely defined.

Victor: Quite right! It's this absence of precise definition, or rather understanding of the nature of these things which in our minds makes them qualitatively different, incomparable. But these differences are relative...

As I've already said, the character of one's perception depends on the speed, frequency of perception. Depending on its speed, the picture of the perceived thing can range from chaotic to dynamic or static.

If our perception of a thing or a process produces a picture of chaos, it means that in the multitude of the picture's elements our mind failed to find anything familiar, repetitive.

If our mind begins to single out and recognize as recurring these or those periodically appearing and disappearing elements, a dynamic picture will emerge. A stable periodicity of such repetitions is generally considered as Time.

Naturally, this stable repetitive element must be vital to the observer. I mean whatever gadgets we might invent to measure time: mechanical, electronic, or atomic clocks – the Sun and the

Moon will remain as the defining measure of all our life cycles.

If we are to give a brief scientific definition, then Time is a result of a juxtaposition of two frequencies, with the received fraction being periodical.

Andrei: What, again frequencies-amplitudes, again physics?

Victor: Yes, what I've done, in effect, is pure physics, where Space and Time are simply ways of arranging, interpreting information, a set of stereotypes.

Andrei: Isn't your work yet another stereotype?

Victor: It is, but more precise, detailed and therefore of greater practical value.

Andrei: It's funny to discuss the stereotype of Time in the institution where even possession of instruments for measuring it is strictly prohibited.

Victor: You mean watches?

Andrei: Well, maybe not just them. I guess I mean there must be some missing link in your logical chain, or to put it plainly, you must have gone astray somewhere somehow. Anyway that's the conclusion all my knowledge and personal experience would rather lead to, unless my knowledge and personal experience are patently insufficient to understand your point. If I follow your logic correctly, the pattern, the path of our development is not determined by the resulting sum of internal and external forces, but by Time?

Victor: Quite right. It's Time which determines these things, both the array of forces, and the pattern, the path of development

of both animate and inanimate worlds. As for your reservation that my statements contradict your knowledge and experience, I'm afraid one has to conclude that you, my friend, have not yet acquired even the humblest of knowledge and experience which Ecclesiastes used to have, to observe that everything happens in its good time; that there's time for birth and time for death, time for killing and time for healing.

Andrei: Time for sorrow and time for joy. Yes, that was a clever move to put me down, considering that

Ecclesiastes is the only author in the Old Testament I have any regard for. But, to tell you the truth, I've always regarded him as a great lyricist and viewed this passage as lyrics, not as physics. You seem to have a physicist's point of view on everything, resorting here and there to physical terms, did you study physics?

Victor: On the contrary, the education I received two decades ago graduating from a conservatory is rather of a lyrics than a physics nature. Until my enlightenment I used to be a musician and played with the

Moscow philharmonic orchestra.

Andrei: Why did you quit? A musician in a philharmonic orchestra is an excellent job.

Victor: Because «no one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel; instead he puts it on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house.»

Well, concerning my choice of physical terms, I must stress that if you seek to explain something, you should choose the

language which can offer us its most succinct description. And physics can offer us the most precise picture of our present-day reality. Of course, this language should be comprehensible to the audience you address. But you seem familiar with physics' basics?

Andrei: Yes, quite. I simply cannot understand how a musician...

Victor: could grasp the language of physics? It's the result of lengthy practice of yoga, of work with one's own body and mind. You see, neither our body nor mind differs in any way from the rest of physical instruments, except that they are more complex. It's only natural that I in my work come to the same conclusions which physics make, that's why I use their language.

Andrei: Funny thing: yoga has always been regarded as an idealistic, religious teaching, while you are proving to be a rabid physical materialist.

Victor: I'm neither. Idealism – materialism are simply points of view, instruments, say, kind of glasses we use to look at the world, some glasses we select are good for reading newspapers; others are good for watching TV. Religion starts where knowledge in its impotence gives way to faith, reason to morals and ethics; the borderline between them is always relative and conditional.

Bachkov, approaching: Sunbathing?

Andrei: What else is there to do? I guess we'll have to spend the rest of the holiday season here.

Bachkov: Well, it's not up to me to decide who or what time is spent here, but I'm sure they won't release you until the festival ends and its foreign guests leave the country.

Dandelion, an old man about 80, addressing Bachkov: Anatoli Sergeevich, could you please give me the keys. I want to weed this flowerbed with dahlias, time permitting.

Andrei: Time is no problem here.

Dandelion looks peevishly at Andrei, without saying anything.

Bachkov: Here they are, Evgeniy Pavlovich. Watch out for the sun: they say it will be hot today.

Andrei: How did this Dandelion come to be here?

Bachkov, taking a seat: His sisters handed him over. He has two sisters in Moscow, and he lived with them...

Andrei: Is he single?

Bachkov: He is.

Andrei: Well, what's the story?

Bachkov: The story is the usual one: either he got on their nerves, or their children wanted more living space...

Andrei: Well, he seems mentally quite sound.

Bachkov: You'd better ask Miroshkin, the late head of the hospital.

Andrei: Which Miroshkin? Do you mean Professor Miroshkin?

Bachkov: Yes, professor Miroshkin, our former head of the hospital. Did you know him?

Andrei: I surely did. He was my forensic expert, diagnosed me

as schizophrenic and certified me as non compos mentis, in short, signed and sealed everything the KGB used to frame me.

Bachkov: Well, it was either him or somebody else: you wouldn't have avoided it anyway.

Andrei: Maybe. I'll only say that prior to Miroshkin they took me to Serbskiy Institute and asked their academician to diagnose and certify me. And he refused...

So, you say the old bastard has kicked the bucket?

Bachkov: He died four years ago.

Andrei: And what did he send the Old Dandelion here for?

Bachkov: I don't know. Maybe for a bribe, or maybe he just did a favor. Anyway, during his term the

Dandelion received sanatorium-like treatment, and had free to access to Miroshkin. The present head of the hospital treats him well too. After all, he's harmless, poses no problem to us, and he likes flowers. This garden is the result of his work here: those gorgeous flowerbeds under the windows, and these lilac bushes. Incidentally, I put my nose into his case file just to find out something about his background. Well, in his early twenties he graduated from Moscow University, after which there's not a single record of his work, or anything.

Andrei: Oh, so the Old Dandelion is a veteran loafer? Why didn't they try him for parasitism? The first frame they tried to put on me when the authorities decided to put me away was a little charge of parasitism.

Bachkov: I don't know. He doesn't have any criminal record

either. Just no record of anything which could tell what his life was. Of course, it's not as if it were my business. But, it's curious.

Andrei: Yeah, if this regime survives after all, my prospects seem as bleak as those of old Dandelion: either take up arms, or live and die outlawed, behind barbed wire.

Bachkov: What's wrong with barbed wire? As far as I know, you've been living in your Star City behind barbed wire all your life, without any objections.

Andrei: How do you know? Did you read it in my case files?

Bachkov: I was taken on a guided tour to your Cosmonaut's Training Center. I used to be on the all-Russia boxing team, and as a champion was given a chance to see how you live there. I must say lots of people would envy the life behind barbed wire you have!

Andrei: Oh, really? So what did you find so tempting there? Sausage or foreign-made garb in our shops?

Bachkov: Well, if so, what's wrong with it?

Andrei: Good question. I hope you, as a sportsman, should know that no one gets such things free: some pay for them with their health, some with their lives, and there are some who would readily sell their souls for those comforts. When our commanding fathers decided to lock me up, and ordered criminal charges brought against me, the investigator from our special prosecutor's office, a rare species of a bastard, told me frankly: «You know I don't have anything personal against you, but you see, I, too, have health problems. I have gastritis and I need

a special dietary country cheese, which I can buy only in Star City, you understand?» I told him sympathetically that oatmeal boiled in water is quite good for the stomach, and he said «Ok, wise guy, I'll see that you have plenty of it, and for a long time».

Bachkov: I'd rather move under the shed and play dominoes with the boys, it's getting too hot here.

Exits.

Andrei, grinning: I guess it's the topic which got too hot for him.

Victor: He's the most decent male-nurse we have here. He studies at a medical college, incidentally. There are also two drunkards from the nearby alcoholic ward; as for the third one, I have no idea who he is, but he has the manners of a criminal, and he associates with Sasha's sort.

Andrei: To tell you the truth, of the three types you've mentioned it's the «decent» type I trust least. When I got in a psychiatric hospital for the first time and they certified me as non compos mentis, I went on a hunger-strike, demanding a court trial. On its seventh day, the hospital administration ordered me force-fed. And there were two male-nurses on duty that day: a «decent» one, as you say, incidentally, a college student too, and the other, an ex-convict, with two prison terms for burglary. And it was this guy who refused to take part in my force-feeding. So they asked for volunteers among the patients – about two thirds of our ward were criminals, brought either for forensic examination or transferred from psychiatric prisons. Well, none

of them volunteered. The two who did came from a «decent» background. So your thesis that morals and ethics begin when scheming ends, I can confirm by my own past experience.

Victor: Well, what I said was that the human mind cannot foresee all the consequences of human acts, which is why it resorts to such safety rules as morals and ethics. But taking into account that the human mind, as it becomes increasingly ego-centered, quickly turns to scheming, rather than reasoning, I think your way of putting it is quite correct. Moreover, it may be painful for you to hear, but your interpretation is close to

Lenin's. He, too, was rather skeptical of the intellectuals' worth, remarking that they are not the nation's brain, but rather its bran, or excrement.

Andrei: I don't know what he said on that score. Anyway I'm not going to replace Christ's commandments with class morals, the way he and his gang did.

Victor: Never say «never», because to some extent he was right on that score too. Of course, the morals of a social class are a poor substitute for Christ's commandments, or rather the moral-ethical norms of the

Cosmos...

Andrei: So, why was Lenin right, then?

Victor: He was right to a point because the degree of human receptiveness to Christ's commandments, incidentally, based on love – that is, the capability of compassion and sacrifice – this receptiveness, indeed, depends on class consciousness: the

more oppressed it is, the greater its capacity for compassion and sacrifice. It's not so much our being, as our beatings, which determine our consciousness. Christ himself stressed that idea, remarking that it's easier for a camel to pass through the needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Andrei: It's no use arguing with you.

Victor: Why not? It's in dispute that truth is discovered. Though our cellmates with criminal records, like Sasha, would say that «He who argues isn't worth shit».

Andrei: I'm afraid they are more correct under the present conditions.

Victor smiling: I see you are already learning the principle of relativity and condition. Incidentally, if I got you right, you live in Star City?

Andrei: Yes.

Victor: And what did they try to prosecute you for?

Andrei: Easy question which is hard to answer. You see when the KGB tries to frame you, the formal charges they bring against you quite often have nothing to do with the actual cause for which you are being prosecuted. In my case the actual reason was so foul that they even were not unanimous on their formal charges and tried everything that might stick, from low parasitism to high treason, but finally decided on evasion of military service.

Victor: I see. A Russian continuation of Yaroslav Gashek's story of the brave soldier Sweik: a spy, a lunatic and a deserter all rolled into one.

Andrei: Yes, sir.

Victor: So what did you do to them that they have such a grudge against you?

Andrei: Nothing. And that's the grudge. As I said it's a long story which started 15—17 years back when they began pressing me to snitch on my schoolmates, and my mother to inform on the cosmonauts, because, as they put, «some of them allowed themselves too much».

We refused – and were subjected to rabid harassment, which is easy in a closed garrison. In short, I was vaccinated against TB, although this vaccination was strictly proscribed to me on health grounds, and against which mother repeatedly warned the doctors. After their vaccination I developed problems with my lungs.

Victor: And they did their best to conceal its cause, leaving you without a diagnosis, but offering treatment in exchange for cooperation, right?

Andrei: Yes, that's about how it actually was. How do you know?

Victor: It's an old, sure way of recruitment. They use it mostly in the labor camps, though. So, what happened next?

Andrei: The next ten years my mother spent trying to get to the truth, in endless appeals to numerous authorities, from the bottom level to the top – all in vain: no diagnosis – no treatment. So I was forced to take up herbal medicine and yoga.

Victor: Did they help you cure the TB?

Andrei: No, they didn't. But they helped me not to die from it; at least, not immediately. Well, after I finished school, I entered a college and was to study applied mathematics, but after six months I had to drop out for health reasons.

After which they were legally bound to draft me. I thought it was my chance to make them diagnose me, so I lodged an appeal with the head of the draft office, demanding judicial inquiry into my case, as well as a medical forensic examination; after which the draft office, apparently under pressure from our top brass and special department, ignored the problem of my draft for five years in the hope that the problem would disappear of natural causes. But it didn't. Then in 1981 they summoned me to our special prosecutor's office, and the prosecutor gave me an ultimatum: either I enlist in the army, and receive the necessary treatment there, or they prosecute me for parasitism. I said Ok, if forensic medical experts were to find me healthy, I'd go to prison.

Victor: It's strange: Knowing how these thugs hate legal scandals and disclosures, it would have been easier for them to kill you rather than start criminal procedures.

Andrei: I suspect that's exactly what they tried to do. A couple of days after my summons to the prosecutor's office, in the early afternoon hours, when I was at home alone and my parents at work, I felt a strange pleasant whiff of some perfume present in my room. I learned later that it was the scent of almond.

Victor: Or cyanide.

Andrei: Exactly. Well, soon I developed symptoms of cardiac

arrest, and I started panting. I must admit that despite my chronic TB and periodic coughing of blood, I had never faced the prospect of imminent death. In short, dying is difficult if it's the first time you've experienced it. Panicking, I gulped a huge amount of eleutherococcus' extract, you know a plant of the ginseng family. They give it as a stimulant to cosmonauts or sportsmen. May be it's this stuff that saved me; I don't know.

Victor: I doubt it. I guess it just wasn't your time to die.

Andrei: I guess you're right. Anyway, dashing around the apartment, I, on the one hand, knew that it was death, and I was dying; on the other, I felt some force which wouldn't let me die. This experience of two opposite forces clashing within me, tearing my body apart, was rather terrible. Yes.

Later that day my parents came and called the emergency. I was taken by our garrison ambulance to the district hospital, where the only thing they gave me was some sedative, for neither the colonel who'd brought me, nor the hospital's civilian staff, could figure out what the problem was.

Next morning I returned home as if nothing had happened, but later in the day some red rash appeared and began spreading rapidly so that by evening my whole body had become red, with a fever of over 40. Again, the doctors were at a loss for the diagnosis: It didn't look like measles or anything else they knew.

Victor: It was the poison burning down in your body.

Andrei: Yeah, I guess so. I can't say how long I had this high fever, nor would I like to go through it again, recollecting all this.

Anyway, I survived, much to the confusion and chagrin of this gang.

So they had no option but to take me once again to the prosecutor's office and give me the same ultimatum: either the army or a labor camp – this time on charges of evasion of military service.

Okay, I said, I opt for the labor camp, but first, you have to conduct the medical check.

They did it, and again the prosecutor offered me to choose: either the army or a psychiatric asylum for criminals. I said how about the five years in a labor camp you promised last time? No, he said; we cannot send you to a labor camp: the medical check shows you have an active form of TB.

After that I had no option but to try, before they did lock me up, to appeal for help to the US Embassy.

That's what I and my mother were institutionalized for.

Victor: Did you go to the Embassy together?

Andrei: Yes. Luckily, they didn't keep her there long.

Andrei: In the psychiatric hospital they continued with their threats, promising me a trial by a tribunal for treason and espionage, unless I showed repentance for what I'd done. I said I'd rather plead guilty and surrender the whole of the spy-ring: meeting places, addresses, names – and what names, too.

To forestall such a scandalous possibility, the KGB reported that in addition to the American embassy, there were two or three other western embassies I had tried to get into; in short,

that I had an obsession for appealing to foreign embassies, after which they diagnosed me as schizophrenic, and therefore non-composmentis; that is, mentally unable to stand trial for the committed crime – evasion of military service.

Victor: If I get it right, it means that you are a deserter, but they didn't try you because you happen to be a loony, too.

Andrei: Yes, sir. And they rounded me up for this youth festival period because I'm also a suspected spy as well.

Victor: Small wonder, in light of the fact that you know English and can freely communicate with the enemy in their own language, an ability often beyond their own mental grasp. How long did they keep you then?

Andrei: I can't say for sure. About three months.

Victor: Just three months? They keep people locked for years in such cases.

Andrei: That's what they had actually planned, but my hunger-strike must have spoiled everything. They did their best to persuade me not to raise a racket: sit quiet for a year or so, they said, and we won't give you any injections, only pills, which you can spit or swallow – nobody cares. In a year the scandal dies down, and we let you out.

I wouldn't listen to their propositions, though. By that time I'd seen enough to know better. Besides, being in a mental hospital and communicating with ordinary guys, like Sasha, I saw that what they'd done to me wasn't an isolated incident, but a typical example of how this system works. I saw that there were lots

of ordinary people actually getting a much harsher deal from this gang than I was. In other words, I understood that dealing with the commies no quarters should be asked, nor given; that they were simply destroying us under various guises, because, I became convinced, sooner or later we'd destroy them. There's no other option, no.

In short, by that time I hated those bastards so much I wouldn't talk with them anyway. Besides, they overdid their persuasions: to make me more pliable, they transferred me from the observation ward where ordinary criminals were kept to the ward for the privileged. Apparently they thought a guy from Star City would feel greater kinship for high-ranking thieves rather than the common rabble which was so overflowing their labor camps that they were forced to send some of them to psychiatric hospitals.

I must say that some of the boys were sent there for taking part in mass protests – either by cutting their wrists, or going on a hunger-strike – there was a lot of unrest in prisons and labor camps at the time.

Victor: The Sun was rather active that year, spurring mankind to fight for freedom, not just in our country, but all over the planet. Remember the workers' revolution in Poland, the tragic hunger-strike of the IRA prisoners in Northern Ireland? They are good examples of this.

Andrei: Of course I remember. Their choice of freedom at the cost of their lives served as an example to all of us who were

enslaved for wanting to be free.

Victor: Well, not only to them. It was this summer that I attained enlightenment: the very same freedom at the price of one's own life.

Andrei: Excuse me, but I don't understand this paradox of yours. If I can believe my eyes, you are more alive than dead, though maybe not quite free.

Victor: The problem is that your eyes can see no further than the outward form. Outwardly, I, indeed, am alive, though not free. Inwardly, it's quite the contrary. Such are the dialectics.

Andrei: I didn't get you just the same.

Victor: Never mind, you'll learn. So what wrong did they do to you by transferring you from the observation ward to the ward for the privileged?

Andrei: I was one of their own in the observation ward. The guys who suffered a lot from the commies hated their guts – and here they send a guy who dared to go to the US embassy, well, the general attitude was understandable.

Solidarity in general was the norm in the ward, something absolutely alien to this pack of bitches called «socialist society». I remember an incident in our canteen when I was called a traitor and a CIA agent by some bastard who either wanted to show his patriotism to win favors, or was just trying to provoke me to a fight – I don't know. Anyway, his reward was not long in coming: his first toilet sortie after that incident proved most unfortunate – he slipped and badly smashed his head on the toilet

bowl. Yeah, after this none of those bitches dared to show us their fucking patriotism.

So they transferred me to the so-called recovery ward, for the bitchiest bitches, like the deputy director of our local Schelkovo steel-mill, some department head in the Foreign Trade Ministry, the head of some big supermarket in Moscow; in short, all those bossy felons, and a couple of bosses' sons – one was a deputy principal in a prestigious English language school. The bastard screwed half of his students, undermined his health, and therefore badly needed treatment; the other one was a young sadist killer who knifed a girl in his class, and she bled to death. What surprised me most was that this scum was allowed what they called «leave», and spent every weekend at home. On weekdays they were given vitamins and electric sleep treatment. And in their spare time they lectured me on patriotism, saying that I must love their fucking country, and defend it by serving in the army, instead of selling it out to the US imperialists. The deputy director of our local steel-mill and the pedophile principal whose daddy was said to hold some high post in the KGB were the ones who persevered the most. I don't know how much patience I had left for listening to those bitches, but luckily, on the fifth day of my hunger-strike, when they saw I was not bowing to their persuasion, they sent me back to the observation ward. And on the seventh, they gave me the hell they had total blackout induced by injections of God knows
promised before. To tell you truth, for me it was a what junk.

Then they released me. Frankly, I still don't know why. Apparently, they were convinced I wouldn't last long, with active TB at that, and they simply didn't want an extra corpse on their hands.

Victor: Yes, I see. Well, nowadays, you look quite healthy, alive and kicking I'd say. I saw you jerk this dumb-bell.

Andrei: Quite right. It may be funny to hear but it was this stint in the mental asylum which spurred my physical recovery. It helped me shed the remaining illusions about our communist pie-in-the sky, giving me such a powerful charge of hatred of our regime and a desire to fight it, that after my release I was improving with magic speed, though I was practicing the very same yoga and herbal treatment which earlier had brought me very little relief.

Victor: It's not surprising: yoga, first and foremost, is a spiritual practice, not a physical exercise, the effect of which is indeed minute. As soon as yoga becomes a spiritual feat for its practitioner, the magic begins.

OK, never mind. I think you'll have lots of other miracles ahead of you, now that you've become a true yogi. This is not crucial. What is crucial is that you now know that one has to sacrifice, to pay with one's life for one's spiritual freedom, integrity, for spiritual values. Now you know that sacrifice is the main law of spiritual development. Like a child, you've only made the first step there. You have yet to learn how to walk, acquiring on your way spiritual skill and knowledge for which

one also pays with his life.

And, knowing your passionate love for communism, I feel inclined to tell you one secret: the communist pie will soon fall out of the sky.

Andrei: Damn, man, do you think it's funny?

Victor: I'm absolutely serious. But let's dwell on it later. The sun is such a treat today that I don't want to spoil the enjoyment with talk of politics.

Act 2

Scene in the ward – Black marketeer

Bachkov: Wake up, wake up, you loonies! Everybody here, get up, get dressed, make your beds, wash your f-f-f-asses. Who's scrubbing today? Victor Vasilievich? Here's the instrument for the master. Voronin, grab your towel and clear out, quick to the observation ward!

Voronin: What for, Captain?

Bachkov: For too much eating and polluting the air.

Addressing a young man standing with his things in the doorway: Come in, this glutton will clear out soon, and you can settle in.

Voronin to the newcomer: Come in. What's your name?

Fedorovich, a young man in his early twenties: Victor.

in the locker. What's this you have, cheese? Can I

Voronin, offering his hand: Valery. Put your things have a little?

Fedorovich: It's a smoked cheese, I don't know if you'll like it...

Voronin: Thank you, I like all cheese, especially smoked. Oh, it's fresh. Know the story about Red Riding Hood? Well, Red Riding Hood was walking in the woods, and bumped into the

Wolf...

Bachkov reappearing in the doorway: Voronin, I'll have you tied to the bunk!

Voronin: Coming, Captain!

Singing: Among untrodden mountain paths there's one that's mine...

Fedorovich, sitting down on the vacant cot, taking a look around and spotting Sasha: Hey, Sasha! You're already here?

Sasha: Hi, Vitya! Come over here for a chat.

To Andrei lying on the next bunk: A good guy, Vitya Fedorovich, we live near each other. *To Fedorovich, sitting down on his cot:* How come you're here?

Fedorovich showed his bandaged left forearm.

Sasha: Slashed your wrist? Why?

Fedorovich: Had to, got into a fix... Let's go out and have a smoke.

Sasha: Go ahead. Shoot, these guys are OK. Anyway, our toilet is teeming with snitches.

Fedorovich: There's little to say. I was just trying to buy a little gold, so I went to a pawn-shop in Moscow to see who's bringing in what, and tried to offer my own price. I was arrested there and then.

Sasha: Jeez! Are you really mad? To do such a crazy thing to get this serious rap? There are always undercover cops slouching about such places, besides the guys who want to engage in gold and hard currency speculation first make sure they

have reliable suppliers and buyers, then they take the risks. You, instead, did such childishly stupid thing as to go straight to a pawn-shop!

Fedorovich: I just wanted to give it a try. You know people take to the pawn-shops lots of precious things, and the state buys them up, paying by weight – a sheer pittance. So I thought of giving it a try: to make a little money and do people a good turn, too, because what they get paid by the state is nothing but legalized robbery in broad daylight.

Sasha: Well, you are a damned fool, Vitya.

Fedorovich: Not just I, Alex the Afghan was with me too.

Sasha: God, what fools! You aggravated your case by conspiracy and group felony, a good prospect of 15 years! Who arrested you?

Fedorovich: Moscow's CID.

Sasha: Too bad.

Andrei: Why?

Fedorovich: They treat you Gestapo style there. Alex tried to keep silent at his first interrogation, so they took him back to the cell, and gave him such a whaling that I, returning from my own questioning to our cell, almost peed in my pants: it was all smeared in blood.

Andrei: Did they beat you up too?

Fedorovich: No, I was more lucky. When they told me they would beat the shit out of me unless I confessed, I warned them I had a heart problem, that my father has a degree in cardiology

and works at a Moscow regional clinic where I undergo regular examinations. This actually saved me from being killed or crippled.

Sasha: Yes, it's nice to have a father with a degree in cardiology. How come you are here?

Fedorovich: The CID knew better than to get involved with me, so they passed me to Schelkovo Police

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