

Sample Translation from

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Kremulator

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First interrogation

Stepping into the dim room, I stifle a laugh. Seriously, I can't control it, the snort bursts out. My investigator is not even thirty. He has the ruddy, clean-shaven face of a pioneer. Pavel Andreyevich Perepelitsa, nice to meet you!

I immediately sense the fresh Chekist blood under the young guy's skin. The state's new servant. He was obviously recruited after the last wave of purges. An eagle chick in a strange nest. Must be a hard worker to have become chief investigator at such a young age. While his peers are being sent to die in the unfolding battle, this little grey mouse is busy stamping execution orders. Investigator Perepelitsa has a new apartment in Moscow on Gorky Street, that's the reward for his hard work!

'His neighbours are a bit strange,' I think. 'Minos probably rents the flat opposite, judge of the dead in Hades, while the goddess of darkness, Hekate, lives on the next floor. In the flat below, lieutenant-colonels Thanatos and Hypnos periodically rearrange the furniture.'

Investigator Perepelitsa gets straight down to business. He gives a rough precis of my life, asks me about my work, then about the war. He wants to cobble together a case against me as quickly as possible, but I'm not going to help him. I am in no hurry to die.

'So, are you going to make this difficult for me?'

'Not at all, Comrade Investigator.'

'I'm not your comrade!'

'Also true.'

Like Perepelitsa, Charon has a full-time position with the NKVD and a timetable for his ferry into the underworld, but I'd rather miss the first few sailings.

'We have two options, Nesterenko. Either you're completely honest and tell me everything, and the courts will look favourably on your cooperation and come to a fair, soviet verdict, or...'

'Or...?'

'Or there's the other way. As a military man I'm sure you don't need me to explain it. Let's just say, I'd have to use all the investigative tools...'

'All of them?'

'Yes, Nesterenko, every last one!'

‘Well, I’ll go for that one then.’

‘So you want to look tough?’

‘I want to prove my innocence by every possible means, Citizen Investigator!’

‘Good, good.’

‘Right!’ barks Charon petulantly, tossing aside his cigarette butt and pushing off from the shore with the oar. I’m not going with him yet.

Having failed to get me into Charon’s boat, Investigator Perepelitsa must carry out months of interrogations. Some of our meetings are brisk like falling in love, while others feel endless like pain.

‘Ok, Nesterenko. Today, for starters, tell me how long it takes for a body to burn.’

‘What?’

‘I’m asking how long it takes to burn someone?’

‘A lifetime!’ I answer, plucking out a nostril hair.

‘Nesterenko!’

‘A body burns in an hour and a half, Comrade Investigator.’

‘I told you I’m not your comrade!’

‘Forgive me...’

‘Go on!’

‘If they’ve been shot dead,’ I explain calmly and carefully, ‘the bullets are left in the bucket with the ashes - one, sometimes two...’

‘Don’t the bullets melt at such high temperatures?’

‘It depends on the core...’

‘I see...Go on.’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Start from where you got to with the investigator in Moscow. Tell me about the night Golov came to the crematorium and demanded the ashes of Zinoviev and Kamenev.’

‘Ok, so the bullets weren’t usually taken from the ashes.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because we wouldn’t have had enough buckets for all the bullets.’

‘Stop being facetious.’

‘Fine.’

‘So, Golov asked you for the ashes of Zinoviev and Kamenev. Is that right?’

‘Yes. That night Golov ordered me to bring him the ashes of both esteemed Soviet comrades, Zinoviev and Kamenev, and I saw him take out the bullets...’

‘Why?’

‘How should I know? Maybe he wanted to melt them down to make teeth?’

‘Nesterenko, no more smart-ass comments, ok?’

‘Ok.’

‘I’ve a truckload more like you here. Don’t waste my time. Is that understood?’

‘Yes.’

‘Right, go on. Why do you think Golov wanted the bullets from the ashes of Zinoviev and Kamenev?’

Good question, but should I tell him? Would my Comrade Investigator even believe what I say? And if he does, then what? What would it change? Internal party rituals are a complex and finicky thing. Does he need a guide? His own Virgil?

‘Answer me!’

‘I believe that Golov was ordered to clean the bullets and give them to Comrade Yagoda.’

‘And why do you think Yagoda wanted the bullets?’

‘It’s hard to say.’

‘Try!’

‘I think he was a sentimental man who wanted them for his own satisfaction. For his ego, or revenge, or maybe both. Heinrich Yagoda kept the bullets in his desk drawer for some time. But then when he was shot, his keepsakes moved into Comrade Yezhov’s drawer, who, as you know, was also executed.’

‘And what happened to the bullets?’

‘After Yezhov’s death, I assume they were offered to Comrade Beria. But he was neither that clever, nor superstitious, so I think he refused to take them.’

‘Nesterenko, this is your last warning! No more of your sarcasm!’

‘Ok, but I’m just answering your questions.’

‘So you’re telling me Yagoda and Yezhov kept the bullets that killed Zinoviev and Kamenev for their own satisfaction?’

‘I can’t think of any other reason.’

‘I see. Do you know who shot them?’

‘Who gave the order? Or who carried it out?’

‘Who carried it out.’

‘Why does it matter?’

‘I ask the questions here!’

‘Ok. Zinoviev and Kamenev were shot by Blokhin.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘It was obvious.’

‘Meaning?’

‘I’m very familiar with Vasily Mikhailovich Blokhin’s style and I rate his work highly.’

‘In what way?’

‘Blokhin is always thorough. He’s a grafter, a true professional. He treats his work, and consequently mine too, with respect. People like that are rare.’

‘Go on.’

‘Blokhin always shoots from below, up into the back of the head, so the skull remains intact. When his assistants carry out the order, I’m often left picking up bits of skull, which takes time. If you have fifteen or twenty bodies to cremate in one night, you don’t want to be faffing around. Even Blokhin sometimes misses. A few years ago, I was about to push a body into the oven, when the guy suddenly shows signs of life. Blokhin was probably so busy, that he aimed a bit wonky and the bullet missed the brain

or something, I don't know. Blokin has executed thousands of prisoners and with volumes like that, mistakes will happen. Anyway, the guy was still alive. He even seemed to grasp what was happening...'

'And?...'

'And what?'

'What did you do?'

'What was I meant to do? I helped my comrade.'

'Which comrade?'

'Blokhin? Who else?'

'Nesterenko!'

'Citizen Investigator, I'm sure you know what to do with a man who, on paper, has been executed, but is actually still alive?'

'I'm asking what you did? Did you shoot him again?'

'With what? My death stare? I don't have any service weapons. And why waste a bullet? Blokhin grabbed the guy by his hair and slammed his head into the trolley a few times. When we were all sure that the prisoner was dead again, I cremated him.'

Such things happen, my dear. The workload is huge. They've executed so many in the last years, but they're always wanting to increase capacities. Everyone is trying to prove their loyalty to Moscow. When you have executioners competing across the USSR, slip-ups are inevitable. You can't increase the volume without an amount of spoilage. But despite the number of competitors, almost no one comes close to Blokhin's score. He's the Stakhanov of execution! Only commandant Zeleny from Kharkov, who personally shot nearly seven thousand men, could share the pedestal with the great Vasily Blokhin. Of course, sometimes Blokhin has to bump off a few more. It's an occupational hazard. A few years ago, he executed a certain citizen Chazov for the second time...

I was sharing a bottle of vodka with Blokhin once, when he told me about the kulak Chazov. He was convicted by a Special troika, then fled execution in Novosibirsk and came to Moscow to complain about Chekists abusing their power. Under interrogation, Chazov claimed he'd been wrongfully convicted, led to the firing ground, smacked in the head with the butt of a gun and thrown into a pit with other half-dead convicts. The

NKVD officers were so lazy, they wanted to just stand at the edge of the pit and shoot them all. So they emptied a few rounds into the men, but Chazov kept absolutely still and managed to survive. The executioners thought he was already dead and didn't shoot at him, although many played dead, so they should've. When the commandants had left, Chazov made a run for it. First out of the pit, then out of Novosibirsk. He went to Moscow to inform the investigators that things had got out of hand in the distant provinces. Moscow's interrogator was disappointed to hear about the sloppy work of his colleagues in Novosibirsk. The botched job was condemned and Chazov was sentenced to be shot again, properly this time. The task fell to the most experienced executioner in the Soviet Union: Comrade Blokhin. I should add, my darling, that Vasily Blokhin did not let them down.

‘And what else can you tell me about Blokhin’s work?’

‘What more can I say? He’s industrious, although...’

Although I know people who criticise Blokhin. Some say he has booze-ups always after executions, which is true. Others say he sometimes takes things from the dead bodies. Also true. I don't think there's anything reprehensible about either. There is a price for every product, even in the Soviet Union, and a tax on every piece of work. You need to understand that Vasily Blokhin's work isn't easy. Sometimes he has a few hundred people to execute in one night. If he or his wife get good use from a raincoat or a pretty jacket, what's so bad about that?

I sometimes wonder why they're so bothered about other people's things. Surely it's the shortages in our own country they should be worrying about. If Blokhin could buy nice clothes like that in a shop, do you really think he'd be taking them from corpses to give to his wife?

Sometimes, on a quiet little street in Moscow, someone will see a passerby walking towards them, wearing an item that belonged to their missing, executed relative: a scarf, a very distinctive pair of shoes, or perched on the bridge of a nose, an exquisite pair of French horn-rimmed glasses, which scream of their wife who disappeared. (And why not? They fit! How symbolic that

both the executioners and victims are short-sighted!). It's embarrassing of course for both Blokhin and the other executioners, not to mention their entirely innocent wives. The response can be excessive: the person who recognised the item of their loved one must be arrested. A secret must stay a secret; there is (almost) no mass repression in the Soviet Union.

I believe that people are destined for different purposes: some are born to kill, others are born to be killed. For example, there are women you trust with your dick, but you don't want to chat to them afterwards. There are men you'd go to war with, but you wouldn't have a conversation with them in the trenches. I've known men who, at different points in my life, I've called friends. I would've poured out my heart to them, but I wouldn't want to be on the same ship as them leaving for Constantinople. And vice versa. Life is full of people we will happily chat to about theatre, ballet or opera, but we don't want to sit beside them in public. Commandant Blokhin is that sort of man. He's good to work with, but you wouldn't want him as a friend.

‘Thanks to Blokhin,’ I continue, examining my nails, ‘I don’t need any extra work, Citizen Investigator. I have plenty. I don’t only burn the bodies, but also the prisoners’ clothes. I sometimes take a look at a shirt and feel reluctant to throw it into the fire, imagining a patch it could have here, or a milk stain there...’

‘Nesterenko!’

‘Occasionally I have to burn the tarpaulin that covers the bodies in the truck. Unfortunately, the khaki fabric absorbs blood quickly and starts to stink, so you can’t use it over long distances. I think Blokhin could do more about that. He should change the tarpaulins himself, or get one of his staff to do it, but that would require discussions...’

‘Enough of your discussions, Nesterenko! Back to Golov. What else do you know about his crimes?’

I don’t answer immediately, but scrutinise him carefully first. I wonder why he is asking me about Golov. What’s it to him? Why does he want information about a man who has been executed? Why are we wasting so much time? What’s he need? Does he want to see whether I’ll snitch on a scumbag who is already dead? Is he testing how

much of a bastard I am? Seeing how far I'll go and who else I might give away? Yes, that's probably the main aim now. He will soon realise that he can't pin a charge of espionage on me, so he'll try to make me spill names that might appear in other cases...

'What else do you know about Golov?'

Ok, I think. If that's what you want, I'll give you Golov. I've no trouble snitching on dead men.

'I know that sometimes, instead of sending bodies for cremation, he allowed them to be buried in Kalitnikovskiy cemetery.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just what I said.'

'You mean people were told that their relatives had been executed and were even allowed to bury the bodies?'

I want to appear like an honest man who is cooperating with the investigation. You're quite aware of that, Citizen Investigator.

I don't remember whether I told you, darling, that when I was working as a taxi driver in Paris, and long before then, when I was an officer in charge of court

martials, I studied people closely. I trained my observational skills and gathered a lot of anthropological experience.

This Perepelitsa, for instance, his acting leaves much to be desired! He's still young and hasn't yet learnt how to feign surprise. His acting is rubbish. Of course, you know much more than me about the theatre, my darling. I don't want to steal your scene, as it were...

The investigator clearly knows about corpses that never reach the pits and ditches, but his image as an honest soviet man obliges him to appear clueless. During the first interrogation, I noticed that although he is young and not a great actor, my opponent has certain strengths. Perepelitsa seems to be a talented official with excellent professional hearing: he records only what's relevant to the case. I watch the Chekist carefully and note the rare times he uses his pencil stub. Perepelitsa responds with interest only to individual words that might prove useful in the future. In different times I think he would've made a good editor. Anything unnecessary must go, let's get rid of that, and here you've got a repetition...

Oh, the arts of the man of duty! Master killer and manipulator, no one is better at fishing out bits of information to put into files. Like the organ tuner at my crematorium in Moscow, Perepelitsa isn't trained to play the instrument, but knows exactly how to fix it. He prepares it for his colleagues, who will one day, in the grip of soviet fervour, falsify my sentence.

'Every dictatorship relies on corruption, Citizen Investigator,' I continue with a smile.

'Is that your opinion?'

'It's a quote.'

'From what?'

'I don't recall.'

Perepelitsa clicks his tongue, but doesn't raise a smile. Imagine my pain, darling, at having to spend these endless nights talking to someone with no sense of humour. Cropped irony, castrated sarcasm. Sadly, his skillset doesn't include ridicule, quips or jibes. The more I get to know my interrogator, the more convinced I am that there's something wrong with our judicial system: the prisoner should choose their interrogator, not the other way round. What can I tell him? What can we even talk

about when he's so buttoned up? Young Perepelitsa hasn't been to Sofia or even Berlin, and if I wanted to describe the atmosphere of Versailles to him, would he even be able to imagine it? How can we develop the trusting relationship that's so necessary for soviet justice if comrade Perepelitsa can't laugh at himself? Blokhin, for example, likes to joke about people he's shot, and our colleague Okunev chats to me about theatre, albeit under strange circumstances. And, my love, I really value those conversations...

'You don't really like having fun, do you Citizen Investigator?'

'Why not? I have lots of fun actually, with my friends or military comrades. Not with enemies of the people!

'Every day comrades are becoming enemies now, aren't they?'

'Don't worry, we'll have that sorted soon.'

'How?'

'By killing you all!'

'Do you really think that's possible?'

'I'm sure of it.'

‘You actually believe the Soviet Union can get to a point where it’s killed every single enemy and the ideal society has been built?’

‘Totally certain.’

‘Sounds simple.’

‘Don’t be sarcastic, Nesterenko, we have all we need to do it.’

‘Oh I can imagine! The great soviet mines! Millions of denunciations and testimonies, gold mines of false accusations and smears, right?’

‘Beautifully put, Nesterenko! You won’t achieve anything here by being a smartass. You’re no different from any of them. Like everyone who sat on that chair before you, you’re a sick coward! We don’t need you in this country, Nesterenko. You’re an enemy!’

‘Really? It seems to me I’m very useful to the Soviet Union.’

‘That’s what you think! No one is irreplaceable here. You have only one last duty to the Soviet Union: to answer the investigation’s questions very precisely. You have been exposed, Nesterenko. Your duty to name your accomplices!’

‘Well...duty must be done...’

‘Shut up and listen carefully to my questions. So, how do you know that some convicts were buried in Kalitnikovskiy cemetery and not taken for cremation?’

‘I don’t understand, Citizen Investigator: are you accusing me of working for another state, or asking about the cemetery in Moscow and the bodies of people who you sentenced to be shot?’

‘Answer my question!’

Of course I’ll answer his question, but mine is also interesting. How many of the people who were executed due to his hard work and desire for a Moscow apartment were brought to me? How often have I put the final touch to his work?

‘Daydreaming, Nesterenko? I’ll ask you again: how do you know that some prisoners were buried in Kalitnikovskiy cemetery and not taken for cremation?’

Well, since he’s so desperate to know...Pyotr Ilych has an answer for everything.

‘In about 1932, an official at Moscow council, Emmanuel Abramovich Zeitlin, told me that the body of

his executed relative had been found by his family with the help of a gravedigger in Kalitnikovsky cemetery.’

‘How did they find it?’

‘That’s what I wondered! They can’t have just looked under the table...’

‘How did they find the grave?’

‘I met Golov once and asked him how the body of an executed man was buried in Kalitnikovsky cemetery and the relatives were even able to put flowers on the grave.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘Golov said that things like that had happened, but they had already been eliminated by the time of our conversation.’

‘Why were you talking about it with Golov anyway?’

‘As you know, from 1932 to 1935 I was responsible for all the cemeteries in Moscow. I said to Golov one day, if there are executed criminals buried illegally in Kalitnikovsky cemetery, gravediggers could suddenly discover their bodies when they’re digging the grave for a ‘normal’ burial.’

‘And what did Golov say to that?’

‘He snapped that it had nothing to do with me.’

‘I see. Do you know any other cases where people found the bodies of their executed relatives and buried them?’

‘According to Golov, there were only a few cases. I don’t know more than that.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Sure as death.’

‘Were there cases where the ashes of the executed were moved?’

‘The ashes?’

‘Yes, Nesterenko, the ashes.’

‘Sometimes ashes were taken to fertilise fields.’

‘Why?’

‘You’d have to ask Vavilov.’

‘I told you to stop being a smartass!’

‘Also, in winter, because there was never enough sand delivered to the cemetery, I sprinkled ashes on the path from the crematorium to the grave, but only in places, so no one would slip. Anyway, the amount of ashes that went missing or was taken was insignificant. I was never told exactly where to sprinkle them or how much.’

‘I see. So if I understand correctly, you always cremated the corpses that Golov and Blokhin brought at night?’

‘Yes. When else could I do it? During the day I was busy with my main work.’

‘So when did you sleep?’

‘I usually slept from five in the morning till ten and when I could, I napped for thirty minutes in the day. You’ve probably noticed that daytime dreams are the most interesting. Do you know, once...’

‘I don’t want to hear about your dreams, Nesterenko!’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m only interested in your professional activities, not your dreams!’

‘Professional activities?’

‘Yes. Like how many bodies you cremated in a day.’

‘It’s hard to say...’

‘Try!’

‘Officially or at night?’

‘The official ones first...’

‘It’s easier to give you the annual figure. I know that in 1931 I cremated about 8300 bodies and in 1932 a little over 9000. The figure stayed at about that level from then on. So on average that’s twenty bodies a day, but like I said, that’s not counting the nights...’

I was the god of ashes. Not a single volcano in the world can compete with the amount of ashes I produced every day, my darling. My basement in Donskoy cemetery was a real underworld. Son of Cronos and Rhea, brother of Zeus, I was Hades, the name they feared to speak. But I wasn’t Thanatos, my darling, I wasn’t Death. I was just Hades, ruling over a kingdom he didn’t want. Zeus’ kingdom was the skies and the world of men, Poseidon’s was the oceans, and mine: all the cemeteries in Moscow and the first crematorium in the Soviet Union, a place that even the gods abhorred.

‘And what about the other years?’

‘Like I said, it was about the same number the other years, only less in 1938.’

‘What happened then?’

‘The oven didn’t cooperate.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘After 1937 we started having difficulties maintaining the constant temperature of repressions, as it were. People can endure it, but technology gives up. For a year we only cremated bodies in the morning and Blokhin disposed of the corpses outside Moscow at night.’

‘I see. Tell me more about your daytime work.’

‘It was actually very normal work. 70% were stillbirths, street kids, but there were also interesting days. For example, do you know who cremated Mayakovsky?’

‘Yes, I do, Nesterenko.’

‘I’m not bragging, but I actually did a lot for our country during the day too. You can’t imagine what happened at his funeral! It was a stressful, difficult day. Moscow was literally paralysed. People were sitting in trees and even the trams stopped running. At least a hundred thousand followed his coffin!’

‘A hundred...’

‘I’m telling you! All these idiots who’d never read a line of his poetry, who didn’t know him from Yesenin or Blok, suddenly decided to turn up en masse at his funeral. The crowds were so big that mounted police came to push them back from the cemetery gates and started firing shots

into the air! I remember thinking: I hope they don't kill anyone and cause mass panic, because they'll drag the bodies straight to me and I don't need any more work.'

'And what did you do with the extra bodies, Nesterenko?'

'Extra bodies?'

'Well, beyond the capacities?'

'It doesn't happen much anymore. But even if they brought more, it's no big deal. They used to keep bodies in the church belfries until spring, when the ground thawed. In Moscow in 1918, for example, corpses were piled high. Typhus, cholera, scarlet fever. The dead were stacked in morgues like logs. Did you know, Citizen Investigator, that a train used to travel round Mother Russia collecting bodies along the tracks? And in Moscow, there were massive heaps of corpses in the cemeteries. But that doesn't happen anymore. The rules are strict for (official) bodies now. For a start there are chiller rooms. And if there's an overkill, you can always put two bodies in the oven at once, head to toe on top of each other.'

'So there's room in the oven for two?'

‘Yes, we’ve been doing it for ages. Since when we used to sell tickets.’

‘What tickets?’

‘Entrance tickets.’

‘To where? The crematorium?’

‘Yes! In the early years, just after it was opened, we did a lot to popularise cremation in the Soviet Union. All over Moscow there were posters saying:

Cremation:

1. The ideal method of burial
2. 100% compliance with all hygiene regulations
3. A solution to the cemetery space crisis in cities
4. Essential in epidemics, wars and natural disasters
5. Dispels centuries-old prejudices
6. The cheapest and loveliest form of burial
7. Easy transportation of the remains
8. Saves your family time

9. Source of architectural, technical, artistic and industrial creativity
10. Sign of an advanced culture

Apart from that, we really believed that it was important to show the ceremony to as many people as possible, for the advancement of the masses. So we sold tickets.'

'For a tour of the crematorium or for the cremation itself?'

'The cremation of course!'

'What?'

'Ten years ago you could buy a ticket to watch it. It was very popular!'

'Even if they weren't related to the dead?'

'Yes, anyone could go.'

'How could they see the cremation if the oven doors were closed?'

'There's a window in the oven so you can check how the corpse is burning.'

'And what did they see, the ones who bought tickets?'

‘Well it depends where they were in the queue. The first saw the coffin go up in flames, the next saw the fire scorch the skin on the extremities and burn the skull. Some saw the skull come apart, the fingers or hands fall off, or the rib cartilage melt. The lucky ones got to watch how the brain burns or the head separates from the body. After that there wasn’t anything very interesting: it all burns out until there’s a pile of ash. Anyway, I soon stopped that practice.’

‘Why?’

‘The relatives of the dead weren’t very happy about the flocks of uninvited guests. I was getting irritated by them too. There was always some prick waving his ticket, moaning that he hadn’t seen enough. Imagine if I’d been able to sell tickets for Mayakovky’s cremation; they would’ve filled a whole stadium! And we could’ve done it fairly regularly, because I also cremated the poets Pikel, Klychkov and Musatov, although they were executed secretly, so we couldn’t have invited anyone anyway...’

‘Were only his relatives there?’

‘Where?’

‘At Mayakovsky’s cremation.’

‘Oh, yes. His lover Lilya Brik was wailing. I remember, I had to politely ask her to move aside so I could send the poet on his last journey to the sound of the International. Talking of Mayakovsky, I have to admit, Citizen Investigator, that I didn’t think much of his latest works.’

‘That’s irrelevant.’

‘Why? He overdid his devotion to the Soviets. It wasn’t sincere anymore, just for show. I think he could’ve been cleverer about it, like Blokhin. And as for his suicide, there was no need for that. I’m a firm believer that there’s nothing in the world worth killing yourself over.’

‘So you couldn’t shoot yourself?’

‘Me?’

‘Yes.’

‘No, never!’

‘Why not?’

‘What’s the point?’

‘Nesterenko, people shoot themselves not *for* something, but because of something.’

‘Well, people shoot themselves for all different reasons. But also for the same reason: because they are

weak, Citizen Investigator. As soon as a tiny problem appears on the horizon, they inflate it to the size of a zeppelin. What do you achieve by shooting yourself? A moment's relief, then nothing, darkness!

‘How do you know there's darkness after that? Have you crawled into the oven with the corpses?’

‘I was wounded once. And in a plane crash. I've been unconscious a few times and pretty much died. There's nothing after death, Citizen Investigator, just darkness. Your brain stops functioning and that's it. There's no point shooting yourself. You take a bullet, but it's your family that's left to deal with everything: clean up your room, pick up your brain, arrange your funeral. Lots of unnecessary stress. Maybe you're looking forward to Saturday. You've got a date, or some fun, but then suddenly your brother or dad shoot themselves. Forget it! Bad luck. You've got to be weak and very selfish to commit suicide. Suicide should be alien to the soviet people!’

‘Have you finished?’

‘I want to say one more thing, Citizen Investigator: I have a very simple, but effective method you might find

handy one day. Whatever happens, if you just add a few words, you've solved the problem...'

'What words?'

'But if that's all.'

'But if that's all?'

'Yes!'

'Mother has died?'

'But if that's all.'

'Your son is dead?'

'But if that's all, Citizen Investigator...'

'They are going to shoot you, Nesterenko!'

'But if that's all.'

'I'm not joking. They're really going to shoot you.'

'Yes, but if that's all.'

'And then they will arrest your wife.'

'And?'

'What do you mean 'and'? Don't you care?'

'Citizen Investigator, in India, when a husband goes to the next world, his widow washes herself, undoes her hair, puts on her best dress and goes with her relatives to the place where they will cremate her husband. The

mourners hold hands in a circle around her. They bind her legs and lay her head on the body of her husband.’

‘Severed?’

‘Severed what?’

‘They lay her severed head on him?’

‘No, alive of course! Friends bring her sweets and ask her to pass on messages to their relatives in the kingdom of the dead. It’s a good tradition, isn’t it? We should introduce it here. When you see a comrade being taken away, instead of hiding in the wardrobe, go and ask them to pass on messages to the other world.’

‘Don’t get sidetracked. We don’t have much time. Then what happens?’

‘Then the priest reads mantras, sprinkles water on the widow’s head and the relatives set light to the pyre. The woman is engulfed by the flames, but she’s chained and can’t escape. She cries and leaves the world with her husband. So if my wife is destined to be interrogated, then that’s what she must do, Citizen Investigator, but if that’s all...’

‘We will see.’

‘We will.’