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HIS FINEST NOVEL...  
*THE STALIN EPIGRAM*  
SHOULD NOT  
BE MISSED'  
*WASHINGTON POST*  
TOP TEN BOOKS  
OF 2009



**ROBERT LITTELL**

**THE STALIN  
EPIGRAM**

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# The Stalin Epigram

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# The Stalin Epigram

A NOVEL

ROBERT  
LITTELL



Duckworth Overlook

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For my muse Stella  
for whom the stars  
(to borrow an image from Philip Sidney's  
*Astrophel and Stella*, 1591)  
"still dance"

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. . . et chacun effectuera avec son âme, telle l'hirondelle avant l'orage, un vol indescriptible.

Mandelsta

*I am alone; all round me drowns in falsehood:*

*Life is not a walk across a field.*

From Boris Pasternak's banned poem "Hamlet," which his friends defiantly read aloud at his funeral in 1962.

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# The Stalin Epigram



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## THE VOICES IN THIS BOOK BELONG TO

**Nadezhda Yakovlevna Mandelstam**, Nadenka to her husband, the poet Osip Emilievich Mandelstam. She is thirty-four years old when we first hear her voice in 1934.

**Nikolai Sidorovich Vlasik**, Stalin's personal bodyguard and occasional family photographer. He is in his mid-thirties when we meet him in the villa of the writer Maksim Gorky.

**Fikrit Trofimovich Shotman**, a popular Soviet weight-lifting champion. He is thirty-two years old when we come across him for the first time. Originally from Azerbaidzhan, Shotman won the silver medal at the All-European games in Vienna in 1932. He subsequently retired from competition because of a botched operation on damaged knee cartilage. After his weight-lifting career was cut short, he worked as a circus strongman.

**Anna Andreyevna Akhmatova**, born Anna Gorenko, close friend to both Mandelstam and Pasternak and a widely admired poet even though the Communist authorities have banned publication of her verse since the mid-twenties. Tall and slender, she was the lover of the then little-known Italian painter Amedeo Modigliani in Paris in 1911 and sat for nude portraits he did of her. Akhmatova, a "decadent poetess" according to her father (who forbid her to use the family name, Gorenko, professionally), "half nun, half harlot" in the eyes of the Bolshevik cultural watchdogs, is forty-five years old when we meet her in these pages.

**Zinaida Zaitseva-Antonova**, a very young and very beautiful theater actress who is on intimate terms with the Mandelstams.

**Osip Emilievich Mandelstam**, Olya to his wife, Nadezhda. The publication of his first book of poetry in 1913, entitled *Stone*, established him in the eyes of many as *the* great Russian poet of the twentieth century, a view that Stalin clearly shared.

**Boris Leonidovich Pasternak**, famous lyric poet, forty-four in 1934, son of the painter Leonid Osipovich Pasternak. His first book of poems, published in 1914, was *The Twin in the Clouds*, which may explain why Stalin, who had a certain admiration for Pasternak, nicknamed him *the cloud dweller*. It took years for Pasternak to accept that Stalin himself, and not the Chekists operating behind his back, was responsible for the deportations and purges and executions.

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# ONE

Nadezhda Yakovlev  
Saturday, the 13th of January 19

SINCE THAT WHITE NIGHT our lifelines first coiled themselves around each other, fifteen years ago come May Day, in Kiev, in a seedy bohemian cabaret called the Junk Shop, I must have heard Mandelstam give public readings scores of times, still the pure pleasure I take from the poetry of his poems is undiminished. There are moments when I am reduced to tears by the unspeakable beauty of the words which take on another dimension when they enter one's consciousness through the ear, as opposed to the eye. How can I explain the miracle of it without sounding like the doting wife swooning in blind admiration? This high-strung, headstrong, life-glad *homo poeticus* (his description of himself, casually offered up when he mooched that first cigarette from me in the Junk Shop in what now seems like a previous incarnation), this nervous lover (of me and sundry others), is transfigured—becomes someone, something, else. (It goes without saying but humor me if I say it: when he metamorphoses into someone else, so do I.) With one arm sawing the air awkwardly, the arc of his body scores the rhyme and rhythm and layers of multiple meaning buried in the text. His head tossed back, the unmistakably Semitic Adam's apple working against the almost transparently thin skin of his pale throat, he loses himself in the thing we call poetry; becomes the poem. When he materializes at the lectern at the start of an evening, there are usually several barely suppressed groans of mirth from the audience at the sight of this fussy, stage-frightened figure of a man dressed as if for his own funeral. On the particular evening I'm describing, he was wearing his only suit (a dark and itchy woolen twill purchased at the hard currency shop using coupons bought with a small inheritance I once received), along with a silk cravat (a relic of his trip to Paris before the Revolution) knotted around a starch-stiffened detachable collar. He reads as only the creator of the poem can read: with a slight pause for breath, an inaudible sucking in of air, at the places where the lines break or bend or double back on themselves. This pause is critical to understanding the impact of a Mandelstam poem. I have compared notes with several of what Osya calls his first readers (with him doing the reading and then doing the listening) and the savvier among them agree that he appears to be inventing the next line as he goes along. And this in turn gives even the listener who is familiar with the poem the eerie feeling that he is hearing these lines for the first time; that they haven't existed before, haven't been composed, reworked, polished, memorized, copied out on onion-skin paper by yours truly and stashed

away in teapots and shoes and female undergarments in the hope against hope that our Chekists, when they come for him, will be unable to arrest his oeuvre.

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The line, the pause for breath, then the next line spilling freshly minted from his bloodless lips—that, my darlings, is at the heart of the heart of a Mandelstam recitation. For reasons I have not entirely grasped, the effect is even more remarkable when he is reading a love poem—and still more startling when the love poem in question isn't addressed to me, his best friend and comrade-in-arms and lawful wedded wife, but to the plume of a theater actress perched on the folding chair next to me in the front row of the dingy *Literary Gazette* editorial office, my fleshy arm linked through her slender arm, the back of my wrist grazing as if by inadvertence the curve of her very beautiful breast.

At the lectern Mandelstam turned away for a sip of water before starting to recite the last poem of the reading. The actress, who used her stage name, Zinaida Zaitseva-Antonova, even offstage, leaned toward me, crushing her breast into my wrist. “Which poem is next, Nadezhda Yakovlevna?” she breathed, her voice husky with what I identified as sexual anticipation.

“It is the one he composed for you, my dear. *Shamefaced glances.*”

Mandelstam set down the glass of water. “*Mistress of shamefaced glances,*” he began, the stubby fingers of one hand splayed above his balding scalp, his pupils burning into the eyes of the woman next to me.

*Suzerain of little shoulders!  
Pacified the dangerous headstrong male . . .*

I leaned toward Zinaida. “Tonight you must conduct yourself decently,” I instructed her. “You must stop teasing him.”

“But it’s you I tease,” she whispered back, flaying playfully at my knuckles with the end of one of the long braids that plunged down her chest. “You excite me as much as he does.”

*Why, like a Janissary, do I prize  
That swiftly reddening, tiny, piteous  
Crescent of your lips?*

*Don’t be cross, my Turkish love,  
I’ll be sewn up with you in a sack . . .*

“In Ottoman Turkey,” I told Zinaida, my lips grazing her ear, “adulterous wives were sewn into sacks with their lovers and cast into the sea.”

Never lifting her gaze from Mandelstam, her reddening, tiny, piteous lips barely moving, she murmured, “Oh, I shouldn’t mind drowning like that.”

*I stand at a hard threshold.  
Go. Go, I say!—Yet, stay a while.*

“Hard threshold,” Zinaida repeated.

“Hard indeed,” I said with a snicker of suggestiveness.

The eleven souls apart from us who had braved a January snowstorm to attend the reading broke into fervent applause. Two or three of the younger members of the audience stomped the wooden floorboards with the soles of their galoshes. The *Literary Gazette*’s chief editor, a brave fellow who had published Mandelstam when Mandelstam was publishable, had been bitterly disappointed by the turnout, which he attributed to the subzero weather. Despite my husband’s low profile in recent years

there were still many poetry lovers who considered him to be an iconic figure, so the editor had reassured us. ~~We liked to think this was true, but we were no longer as sure of it as we had been in the~~ late twenties when a Mandelstam reading could fill a small concert hall.

Mandelstam, suddenly breathing with difficulty (he suffered from occasional palpitation of the heart), swayed drunkenly, then stepped to the side and, steadying himself with a hand on the lectern, bowed from the waist.

“Has he been drinking?” Zinaida asked me above the clamor.

“He drank half a bottle of Georgian wine before the reading to calm his nerves,” I told her. “But he is not intoxicated, if that’s what you mean. I have never seen Mandelstam intoxicated on alcohol, only on words.”

Standing at the back of the room, the woman editorial director of a state publishing house, who was known as the Pigeon (it was widely believed she kept our Chekists informed of who said what at gatherings such as this one), called out, “Questions, answers.”

I waved a warning finger at my husband, hoping to get him to end the evening then and there; I feared the Pigeon would try to provoke him into saying something that could land him in hot water with our minders. When his instinct for survival (mine as well as his) had dominated his fine sense of right and wrong, he used to beat about the bush. No longer. In the months since we’d returned from the Crimea, where we’d seen hoards of rake-thin and bone-weary peasants, victims of Stalin’s collectivization rampage, begging for crusts of bread at train stations along the way, Mandelstam had become dangerously outspoken. In recent weeks he had taken to quoting lines from an old 1931 poem of his whenever one of his acquaintances passed through our kitchen: *How I’d love to speak my mind. To play the fool, to spit out truth.* I lived in dread he would do precisely that—I was terrified he would repeat in public things he’d confided to intimate friends in private: about the individual he called the Kremlin mountaineer, about the utter failure of the Bolshevik Revolution to improve the lot of common people, about the transformation of Russia into a police state far worse than existed under the miserable tsars, about how the Communist apparatchiki who kept an eye on artists had deprived poets of the right to write boring poems.

With a courteous wave of his hand, Mandelstam gave the woman leave to pose a question.

“Tell us, Osip Emilievich, where in your experience does poetry come from?”

“If I could be sure, I’d write more verse than I do.” Mandelstam savored the laughter his comment elicited. “To respond to your question,” he went on when it had subsided, “Pasternak claims the artist doesn’t think up images, rather he gathers them from the street.”

“Are you telling us that the poet is something like a garbage collector?” the Pigeon asked.

“Garbage represents the dregs of capitalist societies,” Mandelstam observed, smiling blandly at the stool pigeon over the heads of his listeners. “Our Soviet Socialist Republics don’t produce garbage, which explains the absence of garbage collectors.”

This, too, drew a laugh; a functionary in the Moscow City Cooperative had recently been arrested on charges of sabotaging the capital’s sanitation department by failing to hire a sufficient number of garbage collectors.

“No garbage, no garbage collectors,” Zinaida agreed under her breath. She uttered it in a way that dispatched a pang of jealousy through my soul; for the instant it takes an eyelid to rinse the eye, she actually *sounded* like Mandelstam.

“What about Akhmatova?” an intense young poet demanded from the row behind me.

“As for Akhmatova,” Mandelstam said, “it is inaccurate to say she writes poetry. In point of fact, *she writes it down*—she opens a notebook and copies out lines that, during what she calls prelyrical anxiety, have already formed in her head. I have known her to substitute dots for a line that has not yet come to her, filling in the missing words later.” Closing his eyes, angling his head, exposing his

throat, Mandelstam recited a verse of Akhmatova's that, like much of her recent poetry, remained unpublished:

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*If only you knew from what rubbish  
Poetry grows . . .  
An angry cry, fresh smell of tar,  
Mysterious mold on the wall,  
And suddenly lines ring out . . .*

"Enough of Pasternak and Akhmatova," Zinaida cried. "Where does *Mandelstam* poetry come from Osip Emilievich?"

Mandelstam favored her with a conspiratorial half-smile, as if they had covered this very ground during one of their so-called literary evenings together. "A poem begins with a barely audible voice ringing in the ear well before words are formed," he replied. "This signals that the search for lost words has been initiated. My lips move soundlessly, so I'm told, until eventually they begin to mouth disjointed words or phrases. Gradually this inner voice becomes more distinct, resolving itself into units of meaning, at which point the poem begins to knock like a fist on a window. For me, the writing of poetry has two phases: when the first words make themselves known, and when the last of the foreign words lodged like splinters in the body of the poem are driven out by the right words."

"God, he makes it sound easy," Zinaida was saying as we waited in the lobby downstairs for Mandelstam to finish signing slim volumes of his early poetry or scraps cut from newspapers with more recent poems printed on them (a rarity since our minders decided that Mandelstam wasn't contributing to the construction of socialism). "I could listen for the inner music from now until the Arctic melts," Zinaida continued with what I took to be a practiced theatrical sigh, "and still never come up with a poem."

"What Mandelstam has," I informed the young actress whom we were both lusting after, "is a gift from the Gods. Either you have it or you don't. If you have it, the music and the words are delivered you on a silver tray."

"Is it true, Nadezhda, what they say about your knowing every poem he has ever written?"

"I am of course extremely familiar with his several volumes of published poetry. But our literary minders pretty much stopped publishing Mandelstam's verse, with the occasional exception, six years ago. In the late twenties, he went through what he calls his *deaf-mute* phase, when he abandoned the writing of poetry entirely. Every poem he has composed since I have had to memorize—I repeat them to myself day in and day out. This way if anything happens to him, the poems could survive."

"And if, God forbid, something were to happen to you?"

The little persifleur had touched a nerve. I wondered if Mandelstam had spoken of the matter with her. Knowing him, probably. Confiding intimate secrets was an unerring way of gaining a woman's confidence; of persuading her you were not violent in order to seduce her into what, in the end, is an essentially violent act. "You have put your finger on a sore point between my husband and me," I admitted. (I was not above sharing intimate secrets to tempt someone of either sex into my bed.) "Mandelstam has few illusions about his own survival, or that of his oeuvre. Since Stalin decreed that nothing contradicting the Party line could be published, Mandelstam considers his fate has been sealed. Let's face it: an unpublished poet makes as much noise as a tree falling in a forest with nobody around to hear it. Stalin's position—which boils down to *Either you are for us or you are against us, my darlings*—leaves no middle ground for the likes of Mandelstam. So you see, my dear Zinaida, my husband had something in addition to his literary legacy in mind when he encouraged me to commit his poems to memory. As we have chosen not to have children, he has convinced himself that my

being the last repository of his oeuvre would give me an incentive to survive.”

“Would it?”

I must have shrugged, which is how I usually evade answering silly questions. Who can say what, besides the hard-to-kick habit of breathing or the ephemeral gratification of sexual congress or the utter satisfaction of disappointing those in power who wish you dead, would push one to cling to life?

Zinaida studied her reflection in the glass door. “If my husband were to disappear into a camp—they have been arresting agronomists of late to account for the long lines at bread shops—it would solve all my problems.” She tossed her pretty head to suggest she was making a joke, but I knew enough about her marriage—her husband was twelve years her senior and had little interest in the theater or in the arts—to understand she was at least half serious. “I would be legally entitled to divorce him and keep the apartment, as well as my Moscow residence permit.”

Mandelstam turned up before I could educate her—wives of enemies of the people were more often than not being sent into exile with their arrested husbands these days. Catching sight of him, Zinaida arranged the shabby fox stole around her delicate neck so that the head of the animal, its beady eyes surveying the world with unblinking indifference, was resting on her breast. Never one to let pass something he considered sexually suggestive, Mandelstam noticed this immediately. “For the first time in my forty-three years of existence I am green with jealousy of a dead fox,” he confessed, causing Zinaida to avert her eyes in feigned embarrassment. (She was, you will remember, the mistress—and I might add, the master—of shamefaced glances.) I pulled the ratty collar of my late aunt’s winter coat, made, if you believed my husband, of skunk fur, up around my neck and dragged open the heavy door of the building. A blast of icy air filled with frozen clots of snow singed our faces. Mandelstam lowered the earflaps on his fur-lined leather cap. “Cigarettes,” he announced, and linking his arms through ours he pulled us into the wintry Moscow street.

Like many men—perhaps I should say like *most* men—Mandelstam sailed through life with a cargo of manias. He lived in terror of his muse and his erection one day deserting him. He lived in everlasting fear of fear. He never thought twice about where the next ruble or the next hard currency coupon would come from—he simply assumed that when he needed one or the other, I would somehow magically produce it, which was more often than not the case. But he worried himself sick that he would run out of cigarettes in the middle of the night when the ringing in his ear roused him from a troubled sleep and he spent the restless hours before dawn prowling the miniscule rooms of the flat we were lucky enough to have, sucking on cigarette after cigarette as he waited for the arrival of those disjointed words and phrases. And so, having sponged two cigarettes from members of the audience upstairs and discovering that he himself had only five Herzegovina Flors left in a crumpled packet, he led us, gripping the white knob of the walking stick he had begun using because of occasional shortness of breath, on a mad quest for cheap cigarettes. We wound up, our heads bent into an eye-tearing snowstorm, making the rounds of the coffee shops and the canteens in the neighborhood, hoping to beg or borrow or buy a full packet of cigarettes. It was at the third stop, actually a late-night canteen for trolley car workers hidden in a small alleyway behind the Kremlin terminal, that Mandelstam found what he was looking for (a shady character who claimed to have a vendor’s license was selling individual Bulgarian cigarettes from a cigar box), along with something he wasn’t looking for: humiliation.

“Osip Emilievich! What brings you out on a night like this? It’s New Year’s Day according to the old style Julian calendar. So happy new year to you, friend.”

The voice came from an unshaven ruffian holding court at two tables dragged together at the back of the canteen. The five young women around him, all wearing padded winter overcoats and sipping what I supposed to be vodka from tea glasses, turned to gape at us as if we were ghouls wandered in from a cemetery. I could tell from the way Mandelstam saluted the speaker with his half-raised

walking stick that he wasn't sure of his identity; Mandelstam often had a hard time putting names to faces when people were out of context.

"Hello to you, Ugor-Zhitkin," I called, and I could see my husband nodding in relief as he grasped the identity of his interlocutor.

"Ugor-Zhitkin, at long last," my husband exclaimed, turning from the seller of Bulgarian cigarette "I have been leaving messages with your secretary for weeks."

"This time of year is always a madhouse," Ugor-Zhitkin grumbled, as if that would excuse his failure to respond. "A thousand and one things to do, a thousand and one people to see . . ."

Mandelstam had learned from Pasternak, two or three months before, that the editor Ugor-Zhitkin was offering hard cash for original manuscripts for the new Literary Fund Library. The only manuscripts my husband possessed, of unpublished (and according to our literary minders, unpublishable) poems, had been written out by me, and he would not part with these even if someone were reckless enough to want them. We were desperate for money—my translation work had dried up as Mandelstam had become *non grata* in the literary world, and we were ashamed to ask Pasternak or Akhmatova for yet another loan that we had no hope of repaying. Which is how we came up with the scheme of concocting a manuscript that Mandelstam could then pass off as an original and sell. Bent over our small linoleum-covered kitchen table with a crust of bread under one leg to keep it from wobbling, he copied every poem from the original green-covered edition of *Stone*, his first published volume, into a grade school exercise book. The chore took the better part of two full days. Getting it to look authentic became something of an obsession with us. Mandelstam remembered or invented earlier versions of some of the poems and filled the pages with crossed-out words and lines. When he finished we took turns thumbing through the exercise book until the edges of the pages became dog-eared, after which we aged the manuscript by baking it under a low flame in a neighbor's oven until the paper turned brittle and yellow. Throwing himself into the project, Mandelstam even went so far as to copy off cryptic notes to himself and a recipe for Polish borsht (a heavy-handed reference to his having been born in Warsaw) on the blank pages. The finished product was carefully wrapped in a page from a 1913 newspaper that I pinched from the university library, and personally delivered by Mandelstam to Ugor-Zhitkin's secretary, who agreed to bring it to her boss's attention the moment he returned to Moscow.

"Come drink in the new year with us," Ugor-Zhitkin was saying, waving to the free chairs at the end of the two tables. He was clearly hoping to avoid the subject of Mandelstam's *original* manuscript of *Stone*. "The girls and I"—the females at the table, who enjoyed the reputation of being his protégées, were counting on Ugor-Zhitkin to use his considerable influence to get their short stories or poems or plays into print; what they gave him in return for this service was the subject of more than one supper conversation in Moscow—"the girls and I are celebrating something beside the Julian new year. Listen, Osip Emilievich, this is a great occasion in Soviet history. We've just come away from seeing our first talking motion picture. Surely you've read the fabulous review in *Pravda*—there are some who are convinced that Stalin himself wrote it since he is known to admire the film. I'm talking about *Chapayev*, by the Vasilyev brothers. It's based on the Furmanov novel about the Civil War hero Vasi Chapayev."

The expression on the face of the Mandelstam who no longer beat about the bush darkened. I knew what was coming and tried to catch his eye and head him off. No such luck. "The trouble with Soviet films, silent or talking," he allowed, slipping into an exaggerated Georgian drawl that was supposed to remind people of how Stalin spoke Russian, "is that they are marked by a wealth of detail and a poverty of ideas, but then propaganda doesn't need ideas."

Mandelstam might as well have poured ice water from the Moscow River over Ugor-Zhitkin and his entourage.



“What is he saying?” gasped one of the girls.

“He is suggesting that Soviet filmmakers are propagandists,” another said.

“It sounds awfully like an anti-Soviet declaration to me,” a third girl observed uncomfortably.

Rummaging in his pockets, Mandelstam came up with the receipt the secretary had written out for

“One original manuscript of the 1913 edition of *Stone*.” He strode across the room, past the streetcar drivers and conductors who were fortifying themselves for the night shift with stale beer, and flattened the receipt on the table in front of Ugor-Zhitkin.

“I’ve been meaning to get back to you about this,” Ugor-Zhitkin said.

“Have you looked at my manuscript?”

“The value of any given manuscript depends on the writer’s specific gravity. Frankly, the general opinion is that you are a minor poet. I am afraid it’s not worth more than two hundred rubles.”

“Two hundred rubles!” His hands trembling with rage, Mandelstam brought his walking stick crashing down on the table. The tea glasses jumped. Two of the girls sprang to their feet in fright. Ugor-Zhitkin turned pale. “*Stone*,” Mandelstam plunged on, the metal tip of his stick tapping the table top, “is a classic of twentieth-century Russian poetry, so the reviewers concluded at the time of its publication. You paid five times what you’re offering me for a piece of shit by—” Mandelstam named a writer whose three-act drama glorifying Stalin’s role in the Civil War was playing to full houses in Moscow.

My great friend the poet Anna Akhmatova claims there are moments in life that are so momentous it appears as if the earth has stopped dead in its tracks for the beat of a heart. This was such a moment in the life of Osip Mandelstam.

“Who are you?” one of the girls demanded. “Who is he?”

I caught my breath. Mandelstam elevated his chin. “I am the poet Mandelstam.”

“There is no poet of that name,” another girl declared. “Once, long ago, there was such a poet—”

“I thought Mandelstam was dead,” said the first girl.

The earth resumed rotating around its axis, though nothing would ever be the same.

“The two hundred rubles,” Ugor-Zhitkin said, determined not to let himself be pushed around in front of his protégées, “is a take-it or leave-it proposition.”

My husband started toward the door, then turned back to the editor. “You are living proof that a man’s character is written on his face,” Mandelstam said so agreeably it didn’t dawn on Ugor-Zhitkin he was being insulted. “Do you happen to have cigarettes?”

Ugor-Zhitkin collected the two partially filled packets on the table and handed them to Mandelstam. “Happy nineteen thirty-four to you, all the same,” he said.

I saw my husband nod as if he were confirming something he didn’t like about himself. “I accept the two hundred rubles,” he announced.

“Come around in the morning,” Ugor-Zhitkin said, barely swallowing a smile. “My secretary will have an envelope for you.”

Kicking at a drift of snow outside the canteen, Mandelstam managed a cranky laugh. “Mandelstam dead!” he said, making no effort to conceal the anguish in his voice. The words that then emerged from his mouth seemed to be transported on small billows of frozen breath. “Dead—but—not—yet—buried.”

I can tell you I shivered, not from the gut-numbing cold but from a presentiment of terror. What in the world did he mean by *Dead but not yet buried*?

Zinaida asked the hour. Mandelstam never wore a wristwatch but always knew the time; he was never off by more than a minute or two. “It is twenty past eleven—too late for you to return to your own flat. You must come home with us and spend the night.”

I took Zinaida’s elbow. “We simply will not accept no for an answer, darling girl.”

“You owe it to me as a poet,” Mandelstam said a bit frantically. “Nothing so depends on eroticism as poetry.”

“That being the case,” she said with a pout, “I shall have to say . . .”

I could see my husband was hanging on her reply; the prospect of an erotic encounter with this gorgeous creature had pushed from his mind everything that had happened to him that evening.

“I shall have to say yes.”

The three of us fell into lockstep as we headed toward Herzen House and our flat. “I outfoxed that asinine Ugor-Zhitkin, didn’t I?” Mandelstam said, his spirits soaring. “Two hundred rubles for a phony manuscript! Come along, Aida. Come along, Nadenka. If I am unable to publish poetry, I can at least produce counterfeit manuscripts until the inkwells run dry in Russia.”

Nashchokin Street was caked with ice. Linking arms, we made as if to skate the last thirty meters to the writers’ building. The hallway inside our wing reeked from the rancid insecticide used to kill bedbugs. We were convulsed with laughter as we threw open the door to our ground floor flat and, flinging the overcoats to the floor, sprawled short of breath on the bedraggled sofa in the living room. We could hear the Swiss clock, with the heavy weight hanging on the end of the chain, ticking away in the kitchen. The radiator under the window that I’d painted rose red hissed and belched as if it were human. Somewhere above us a toilet flushed and water rushed through pipes in the walls, but nothing could dampen our spirits. The telephone in the niche at the end of the corridor started ringing and kept at it until one of the tenants answered and then shouted, “Lifshitz, Piotr Semyonovich, your wife would like to have a word with your mistress,” which set us to giggling like schoolchildren.

When I’d caught my breath, I said something about how sexual relationships were never uncomplicated in this socialist paradise of ours.

Mandelstam set three thick kitchen tumblers on our makeshift coffee table (actually an old suitcase plastered with stickers from Heidelberg, where he’d spent a semester in 1910) and poured out what was left in the bottle of Georgian Khvanchkara, then raised his glass. “I propose we drink to the health of those who are responsible for this happy life of ours.”

“No, no, let’s drink to the three of us,” I suggested.

“To the three of us,” Zinaida exclaimed.

“Well, then, to the three of us,” my husband happily agreed and we clanked glasses and drank off the wine.

“Three is a lucky number,” Mandelstam said, pulling his cravat free as he licked the last of the red wine from his lips. And he launched into a self-conscious soliloquy (one that I’d heard before) about how the Bolshevik Revolution had had sexual as well as social and political consequences. “In the twenties,” he told our guest, “the *ménage à trois* began to be widely practiced in intellectual circles. Everyone remembers the relationship between Osip and Lily Brik and Mayakovsky. Shostakovich had an open marriage with Nina Varzar. Akhmatova once lived with the very beautiful Olga Sudeikina and the composer Artur Lurye.”

I supplied the succulent details. “She used to say they could never decide which of them he was in love with, so they both loved him and each other.”

Mandelstam said, “I speak for my wife—don’t I, Nadenka?—when I say we consider a three-way marriage to be a fortress no outsider can conquer.”

“Is he accurately representing your views?” Zinaida demanded.

“Yes,” I said. “It seems to me that in this dead country, where nothing can be reborn, the *ménage à trois* is the ideal citadel.”

“Did you ever see any of his conquests as a threat to you?” Zinaida persisted.

I exchanged looks with my husband. “When our paths first crossed, in a cabaret in Kiev, we appeared to be ships passing in the night until, as he later put it, I blew him out of the water. Soon

after we met, Mandelstam and I were separated by the Civil War. I was your age at the time and missed him terribly. He wound up in Petersburg, where he had a three-month fling with Olga—Arbenina. What I resented most was not Arbenina—I can understand any female of the species being attracted to Mandelstam. No, what I resented most was Mandelstam. When he took up with that woman, he and I were on intimate terms. He called me sister and addressed me using the familiar *ty*. But when he got around to writing me after meeting Arbenina, he switched into the formal *vy* and I understood we would have to begin from zero in our relationship.”

“What did you do?” Zinaida asked, looking eagerly from one to the other.

“The answer is as plain as the beauty mark on your chin,” Mandelstam said. “We started again from scratch.” And he added, more for my ears than Zinaida’s, “Loving a third person is not without risks.”

Zinaida wanted to know if we had ever come close to splitting up.

“There was a bearded writer in the mid-twenties,” I admitted.

“Oh, do tell me who it was,” she demanded.

I could only smile at the memory. “His last name began with the initial *T*. More I will not tell you. It was a time when I was mutinying against my husband’s definition of a couple—he expected me to abandon my life to him, renounce my own self, become a part of him. This mutiny took the form of falling head over heels in love with *T*. But I fortunately came to my senses.”

Zinaida turned to Mandelstam. “Do you still expect Nadezhda to abandon her life and become part of you?”

“We have since met on a middle ground,” he replied.

“Recount your first experience as a *ménage à trois*? Were you nervous? Were you . . . inhibited?”

“For me,” Mandelstam said, “the baptism of fire was with two sisters who acted in motion pictures —”

That was simply too much for me, even if we were both of us in full seductive flight, so to speak. “He is lying through his teeth,” I exploded. “Before we met he knew nothing of such things. He would undress in the dark, for God’s sake. I was the one who initiated him.”

“But *you* don’t respond to the question, Nadezhda Yakovlevna. Were *you* inhibited the first time?”

“The first time one is always timid, darling girl. You are fortunate in that you have us to light the way.”

Zinaida crushed a fold of my long skirt in her fingers and pulled me closer. “I confess that I am embarrassed,” she said softly, her cheeks burning, her eyes aglow.

“I am able to fix that,” Mandelstam said impatiently (the foreplay was taking longer than he had anticipated). “Take off your clothing and the three of us shall repair to the bedroom for a conversation that doesn’t require a knowledge of dialectical materialism.”

I reached to undo the top buttons of her blouse and, placing the tips of my fingers on the swell of a breast, kissed her lightly on the lips. Mandelstam removed his jacket and his collar and, offering a hand, led her toward the small bedroom. “There were English poets,” he told her, “who believed that for each ejaculation, a man loses a day of his life.”

“Does that suggest the woman gains a day?” Zinaida inquired with feigned innocence.

“Not,” Mandelstam said mischievously, “unless she swallows.”

Zinaida’s little shoulders shook with soundless laughter. “I should not feel comfortable lengthening my life at the expense of shortening yours.”

“Don’t worry your pretty head over it,” I remarked as I followed them through the doorway. What left unsaid was this: It was the poems that failed to beat about the bush, not the orgasms with this bewitching sea nymph, which risked to cut short Mandelstam’s lifeline. Not to mention mine. When we’d burst through the door of the flat earlier, I’d instantly detected what my husband, too enthralled by Zinaida’s petal-of-rose perfume, had missed: the stale aroma of a strong tobacco that only men

smoked. And I noticed, as I was meant to, that the glass ashtray on the windowsill was filled with cigarette ends. I didn't have the heart to spoil Mandelstam's Lucullan banquet by telling him we'd had visitors. At least for the space of a few hours, he would put behind him the agony of no longer being published, the indignity of reading his poems to eleven people, the humiliation of *Once, long ago, there was such a poet*.

Dear God in heaven, while he still has a muse and an erection, arrange things so the sun will simply fail to rise tomorrow morning. Amen.

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## TWO

Nikolai Vlasik  
Monday, the 19th of February 1934

THE CELEBRATED MAKSIM GORKY himself, wearing a belted beige greatcoat with an astrakhan collar and strutting like a White Russian doorman at a Pigalle cabaret, was patrolling the portico when I pulled up in the motor pool Packard. “You will be Vlasik,” he called out in a shrill voice, looming alongside the automobile to haul open the door on the passenger’s side before my chauffeur could circle around and do it himself.

“At your beck and call,” I shot back, flashing a tight little smile meant to convey that I was anything but. Nikolai Sidorovich Vlasik was at the beck and call of only one man in the universe, the *caid* in the Kremlin we called the *khozyain*—that’s a Georgian expression meaning head of household though the household in question sprawled from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from the Arctic icecap to the Pacific Ocean. Gorky, his hair slicked back with pomade and a wispy handlebar mustache trickling off his upper lip, led the way into the gaudy foyer of his Art Nouveau villa. An enormous painting of an emaciated naked lady picnicking with two fully clothed gentlemen on the bank of a river filled an entire wall. You could see a smaller version of the same painting reflected in the steel-framed mirror on the opposite wall.

“Playing host to Comrade Stalin is a new experience for me,” Gorky declared, pitching his greatcoat into the outstretched arms of a servant. “Where do we begin?”

I can’t say I thought much of the villa or the naked lady or Gorky, whom I’d seen from a distance at Kremlin receptions when “Russia’s greatest writer” (as *Pravda* called him when it recounted a meeting between Gorky and a young American author named B. Schulberg) was trotted out on cultural occasions. I’d never read anything Gorky’d written, not even his *The Canal Named for Stalin*, nor did I intend to. (Not that I had much time for books; my official duties as the *khozyain*’s personal bodyguard, factotum and occasional family photographer barely left evenings free to service my concubines.) According to the dossier provided by Second Deputy Chairman of the Cheka Genrikh Yagoda, Gorky, a.k.a Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov, was one of those “vegetarians” (my boss’s delicious turn of phrase, derogatory, meant to distinguish between the fainthearted revolutionists and the “red meat eaters”) who had abandoned Lenin in the early twenties when the going got a bit sticky. For a time he had been living abroad with a famous beauty of her day, Moura Budberg, who had

previously been the mistress of Britain's consul general in Moscow at the time of the Revolution; Yagoda told me he suspected the Budberg woman of spying, but he couldn't figure out for whom. The *khozyain*, for reasons beyond me, had lured Gorky back to the homeland from his lavish Italian exile in the late twenties by offering him this villa in the Lenin Hills that once belonged to the millionaire Ryabushinsky, as well as a couple of *dachas*, one near Stalin's not far from Moscow, the other in the Crimea, each resplendent enough to set the mouths of visitors to watering, so I've been informed. In case this wasn't bait enough the boss, with a stroke of the pen, changed the name of Nizhni Novgorod the writer's birth city on the Volga, to Gorky. (It was rumored that Yagoda, who also came from Nizhni Novgorod, was furious the city had not been named after him.) No wonder Gorky came back to Russia! As Christ is my witness, I'd seriously consider taking up residence in America if the *khozyain* in Washington, that crass capitalist F. Roosevelt, agreed to change the name of Chicago to Vlasikgrad.

Yusis, the Lithuanian who had been working for the *khozyain* as long as I had, longer even, turned up behind me with my chauffeur, an Ossetian tribesman from the mountains of Georgia; talk about red meat eaters, the Ossete had been a tsarist prison guard in his youth. I gestured for them to search the house and, fingering the small German pistols in the pockets of their leather jackets, they set off in different directions to explore it from attic to cellar. "We'll start with the guest list," I told Gorky as we walked down several steps, our footfalls echoing off tiled walls, into the long mirrored reception hall lined with Chinese vases where my boss would meet the writers.

Gorky, agitated, thumbed his false teeth back into place. "But the list of guests has already been vetted by Comrade Stalin's secretariat."

"I am the head of the *khozyain*'s security detail," I informed the fair weather friend of Lenin's who had jumped ship at the sight of spilled blood. "It's me who has the ultimate responsibility for his safety. The list, if you please. The list, even if you don't please."

I am a big-bodied man who keeps fit by doing push-ups every morning and moves with the agility of someone half his weight; it has been said of me that I am able to walk across a room without provoking the creaking of floorboards under my feet. Browbeating vegetarians is what I do to work up an appetite.

Gorky produced a typescript from the breast pocket of a European suit jacket with ridiculously wide lapels. Settling onto one of the steel-and-celluloid chairs, I went over the page, which had thirty-eight names on it selected by Gorky, typed in two neat columns. I uncapped my fountain pen and scratched lines through the names of three film writers and three novelists and two editors whom I knew to be on Yagoda's shit list. When I handed the page back to Gorky, he looked rattled. "These people have already been invited—they will turn up at my door in three quarters of an hour."

"You are not only the host here—you are the head of the Writers' Union. You will station yourself at the entranceway, Comrade Gorky. Tick off the names as the guests arrive. The ones whose names have lines through them are to be turned away."

"What the devil will I tell them?"

"You are an inventor of fictions—tell them whatever comes into your head. Only be sure they do not get in. Now let me see the seating plan."

I studied the page he handed me, which corresponded to the long table that ran the length of the reception room. The *khozyain*, according to Gorky's plan, was to be seated at the head of the table. "Comrade Stalin never presides at receptions," I informed the writer. "You yourself will sit at the head of the table. He will sit immediately to your right with his back to the wall. Instruct your server that the food he eats and the wine he drinks will be supplied by me. If he desires tea, I will pour it from a thermos flask." Crossing out names and writing in new ones, I rearranged the seating order so that my boss would be surrounded by writers and editors whom I knew to be members of the Party, and returned the page to Gorky, along with one of the Cheka's manila file cards with the names of

three of his servants typed on it. "Get rid of them for the afternoon," I instructed the great writer. "We don't want them coming anywhere near the *khozyain*."

Gorky squinted at the index card in disbelief and for a moment I thought he might have more spine than his detractors gave him credit for. "These people," he blurted out, "have been with me since I returned to Russia—"

I glanced impatiently at my wristwatch. "They have Israelite names, Comrade Gorky," I said, assuming that would be explanation enough.

"Israelite names! Some of the comrades closest to Stalin are of Jewish extraction—Zinoviev, Kamenev, Kaganovich, even your Chekist Genrikh Yagoda. Lenin himself is said to have had Jewish blood—"

I cut him off. "The archtraitor Bronstein-Trotsky is an Israelite. We are concerned that he will attempt to assassinate the *khozyain* with the assistance of the international Zionist conspiracy."

Gorky rolled his eyes in dismay. "Inviting the *khozyain* to meet with writers under my roof has turned out to be more complicated than I imagined when Stalin suggested the idea."

The first of the writers and editors, arriving in private automobiles or taxicabs or on foot, began turning up as the chimes in the Kremlin tower across the river tolled high noon. I could see the hunched figure of Yysis, standing immediately inside the front door, scrutinizing the guests with his unsmiling eyes as they removed their winter coats and piled them on the tables set out for that purpose in the foyer. Gorky was arguing with two men at the door, throwing up his hands helplessly as he turned them away. My Ossetian chauffeur had taken up position in front of the swinging doors leading from the reception hall to the kitchen. I kept an eye on things for a while, then made my way to the servants' entrance off the laundry room next to the kitchen, which gave onto an unpaved alleyway behind the villa. At half past the hour, a 1911 Rolls-Royce with teardrop fenders turned into the alley and pulled to a stop at the back of the villa. At both ends of the alleyway I could make out soldiers armed with rifles fitted with bayonets blocking off access from the street. Two of Yagoda's people in civilian clothing sprang from the car. One of them came up to me and saluted while the other held open the rear door of the Rolls-Royce. The *khozyain* emerged from the automobile, clearly in no hurry to get where he was going; he loathed public functions and held all writers, with the possible exception of Mikhail Sholokhov, the poet Pasternak and another poet with a distinctly Israelite name that escapes me now, in low esteem inasmuch as he considered them to be careerists who served themselves first and the Revolution a distant second. My boss, with a worker's cap on his head and a plain army greatcoat thrown over his shoulders, spotted me at the door and raised a hand to acknowledge my presence. A cigarette bobbed on his lower lip. He treated himself to a last drag before flicking it into an open garbage pail. (Comrade Stalin, who was vigilant about the image he presented to the world, made a point of never being seen in public or photographed smoking a cigarette.) Walking with that distinctive pigeon-toed gait that actors who played him on stage imitated so artfully, he came through the doorway.

"Everything in order, Vlasik?" he muttered.

I nodded once. I'd been the *khozyain*'s bodyguard since the Civil War. He knew me well enough to know I wouldn't let him set foot in a building if it wasn't.

"What kind of humor is the great Gorky in today?"

"I get the impression he thinks he is doing you a favor."

A guttural laugh worked its way up from the back of the *khozyain*'s throat. "Asshole." He shrugged the greatcoat off his shoulders. One of Yagoda's people snatched it before it hit the floor and folded it over the back of a bench. Under the coat Comrade Stalin was dressed in one of the rough peasant tunics he favored when he appeared in public, and baggy woolen trousers tucked *muzhik*-style into soled leather boots with thick heels designed to make him taller. (When he reviewed parades from the top of

Lenin's Tomb, he stood on a wooden milk box so his head would be as high as, or higher than, those the marshals and Politburo members around him. I happen to know this because I supplied the milk box.) I followed my boss through the laundry room and the kitchen and reached past him to push open the swinging doors leading to the reception hall. Word of his arrival spread like wildfire through the room. Conversations died away. The writers and editors who were already sitting at the table jumped to their feet. The others, milling around clutching small glasses of *pertsovka*, a fiery vodka aged with pepper, stood to attention, looking for all the world like gymnasium students in the presence of their schoolmaster. My boss waved his good hand in a vague greeting that took in everyone. A fawning Gorky materialized out of the crowd and made a great show of welcoming him to the villa the *khozyain* had given him. Comrade Stalin pulled a Dunhill pipe from the pocket of his tunic and carefully packed the bowl from a pouch (which I'd filled with tobacco shredded from one of his favorite brands of cigarettes, Kazbek Papirosi). Gorky produced a silver pocket lighter and cupped the flame over the bowl of the pipe as Comrade Stalin sucked it into life. For a moment the two of them were obscured by a cloud of smoke. I ambled between knots of guests to be closer to the *khozyain*. As I drew nearer, a beam of sun streaming through the skylight caught his face like a spotlight and I was struck, once again, by how worn-out the boss appeared. He was in his middle fifties and looked his age, but acted older. His mustache, which his eight-year-old daughter, Svetlana, complained of being prickly, drooped like a weedy plant in need of watering. He had what we laughingly called a *Kremlin* complexion that came from working fifteen-hour days—his skin, pitted with childhood smallpox scars, had turned a sickly sallow. His rotting teeth, clearly visible as he gnawed on the stem of his pipe, seemed to mirror the general decay of his body.

For those of us who were on intimate terms with Comrade Stalin, it was no secret that he was waging a rearguard action against a persuasive despair. Oh, he could put on a show in public, but most mornings found him, after yet another sleepless night, in a black mood ranting about his chronic tonsillitis or the rheumatic throbbing in his deformed arm or an ache in a tooth that the dentist Shapira (another Israelite for me to worry about!) had failed to alleviate during a visit to the Kremlin clinic the previous afternoon. The women in his entourage—Molotov's wife, the Jewess Polina; Bukharin's new bride, the beautiful twenty-year-old Anna Larina—thought he had never gotten over the sudden death, a year and a half before, of his young wife, Nadezhda. Of course no one spoke of this in front of him lest his legendary Georgian-Ossetian temper, which could burst like a summer squall, put an abrupt end to the conversation, not to mention the Kremlin pass that gave you access to the court. (Everyone agreed that the absence of a serious female companion contributed to the *khozyain's* depression; I myself had casually offered to introduce him to one or several of my concubines, but he had declined so brusquely it discouraged me from raising the subject a second time.) The men close to Comrade Stalin—his longtime secretary, his chief of staff, assorted members of the Politburo, even Yagoda—had another take on the situation. For them, the boss's obsession with forcing the peasantry onto collectives had come home to haunt him. Tales of deserted Ukrainian villages, of cattle cars filled with starving peasants, of rampaging mobs burning seed grain and killing livestock, circulated in the Kremlin. The forbidden word *famine* was being spread about. Was Comrade Stalin, the man of steel who had held fast during the roll of the dice we referred to as the *Revolution*, as well as the brutal Civil War that followed, losing his nerve? Was he afraid the chaos he had unleashed would spiral out of control; that the Ukrainian breadbasket would be lost forever to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; that his Politburo colleagues, faced with the collapse of Bolshevik power, would plot behind his back to strip him of his leadership role—or his life?

The cigarette tobacco in his pipe seemed to settle the boss's nerves. Sinking into the seat to the right of Gorky, he even managed to chat stiffly with the writers and editors nearest him. "That's a good question—our history books skim over this period of Stalin's life because it would be unseemly



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