

CHRISTO AND ALL THOSE BAD THINGS

by Georgi Tenev

I came across Christo by accident, by a suspicious accident, by a completely routine mistake. It should have been Castro. And now I know it would have been better if it had been, it would have been much better. I was still working at the television station. Thus it was inevitable that sooner or later I would run up against the last remaining good side of politics: pure revolution.

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“Dear Mr. Castro, I realize that it is highly unusual to write a letter longer than one page to a person of your importance. Therefore, in order to save you time and without intending any disrespect, I will attempt to be as brief as possible. I would like to shoot a documentary film about you. The film I have in mind would not be a trivial news report, nor would it be propaganda or anti-propaganda. What were the beliefs that led you to change the world, or at least the fate of Cuba? I speak to you as a man who also resides in a country with a feminine name. Is it possible that everything began simply with the conviction that you have a plan and a program and can see clearly who the enemy is? Where is the spark of inspiration, where is the irrational element? And now about disappointment – does disappointment exist for Fidel? We experience this feeling most strongly when the end is near. Disappointment itself stops everything dead in its tracks, wherever it appears. Love no longer exists, desire no longer exists, there is no longer any reason to continue. Best Wishes!

Respectfully yours,”

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Castro had sent his answer directly to the editors. A fax consisting of a handwritten scrawl: “¡Muerte!” Added below this, by a more delicate and obviously female hand, perhaps belonging to one of his young female bodyguards, was the following message: “He is expecting you. At first, he was extremely enraged, but then he said ‘Bring him here,’ thinking you were already in Havana. He is very agitated. If you arrive after Friday, come directly to the residence in Mayari.” Enraged? Agitated? Hopefully this was not the reason he was taken prostrate to his bed only one day later.

My departure was postponed, which was perhaps for the best, as I had not even begun to scrape the money together for the trip. It was only then that I questioned the wisdom of having written such a letter to a 70-year-old man, whose doctors had forbidden him even the simple pleasure of cigars. It was only when I reached out to throw away the draft of the letter that the letters of the name transformed themselves before my very eyes: Castro, Christo.

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“Christo, you wrap objects, bridges, buildings. I know that you will say that you have also done many other things. But I think there is also one living, breathing person whom you have wrapped up. Take the foreign language that you speak – not particularly well – while absolutely refusing to speak Bulgarian for any reason; take also your changed name – these are wrappings. This is not to say that they are false façades, intended to fool the viewer into thinking the building has been changed. Quite on the contrary, such wrappings emphasize that outside something has been slipped on over that which continues to exist inside. When did you begin to become a person who wraps up his very self?”

8 September, noon

Christo Yavashev and Pilar-Annuncion. Have I really grasped the fact that I am about to meet with a man who for half a century has remained in love with his wife? I settle into the seat next to the cameraman, fasten my seatbelt and lean back. I have no idea what Christo's plans for me are, but he surely expects me to land on the doorstep of their studio gasping with joy and full of remorse for the stupid things I said five years ago. But the thing he could never have guessed is that his strange idea opens up a whole new dimension for me. The flight that now awaits me brings me closer to Heliana – for the first time in a purely physical sense.

Local time: 9 September, morning

New York. Manhattan. I have never been in America before. Christo and Pilar arrived here in 1964. Their first winter here was no different than that of all other immigrants. Thirty years later, the mayor allows them to wrap entire skyscrapers. We need to scout the location. The cameraman has set the camera on his shoulder and is filming the towers. I know in advance that I won't be meeting with either of them before the opening on Tuesday. Until midnight on the 10th, Christo will be drawing sketches, which will subsequently be sold. Only until then, and not a single drawing later. He is not exactly an artist, of course, otherwise he would never be able to pedantically follow the dogmatism he and Pilar have come up with. If he hadn't invented his own

calling, he may well have become dangerously religious. Now the cult revolves around his work, with Pilar as the Spanish priestess who tends the altar. Incidentally, before we sat down at the table to eat that spaghetti, he said a prayer. The only thing I've ever heard him say in Bulgarian.

10 September, evening

The two towers of the Trade Center seemed unbelievably tall to me. But I assume that for Christo, they are absolutely perfect. I thought to myself: this person always tries to create beautiful things, only to then dismantle them himself prematurely.

“You play with creation and death,” I said to him then. “It is as if you want to prove that something beautiful can be created not only on a canvas, but also on a gigantic scale. Nature, however, is full of death, therefore you and Pilar try to fool her. You produce works of such huge proportions, so big that they appear like natural phenomena.

And before the end comes, when they would collapse according to natural laws, you have already sketched from life what you need. Afterwards, you dismantle them, and everything disappears. It is like taking photographs, which picture almost real people, but when you go to look for the models, you cannot find them – neither still alive, nor already dead. What I'm trying to say is that you are preoccupied with death, however much you may talk about life.”

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It'll be a phenomenal day in New York, I bet. They're expecting three million people to turn out to see the skyscrapers wrapped in plumage. The white cloth is stored on gigantic 60-metre rolls on the roofs of each of the towers. The rolls weigh four tonnes each, wrapped around special aluminium rods, which contain built-in bearings. At exactly 6:04 am, at sunrise, 212 workmen will begin to lower them down the four sides of the building, in perfect synchronicity, of course.

Two hundred of them are hired technicians and assistants, 10 are coordinators, and the final two making up the total are Christo and Pilar – she on one roof, he on the other. As usual, they have considered the effect as viewed from the side or from the ground, and not from the air. Thus, the roofs themselves will remain uncovered, but there is no way for this to be seen, since there are no buildings taller than the twin towers in Manhattan.

I avoid thinking about Heliana, despite the fact that her address is written on a slip of paper in my pocket.

I've been carrying it around, but haven't yet called. In this game, it is impossible for chance not to play a part, and at a certain point everything is just chance. Therefore I've decided to leave things as they are, at least until tomorrow. It seems to me likely that she will come to Manhattan to see the skyscrapers wrapped by Christo – despite her exotic name Heliana, she is nevertheless Bulgarian. To expect to meet her in the crowd is absurd, of course, but I'm not hoping for anything in particular. That's why I said chance, and not hope. The new person in me no longer depends on hope.

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I ended up with an oddball of a cameraman. I assume he is competent, but I can't imagine we'll have anything to talk about. Silence, however, gives birth to exceptionally interesting words. It only now occurs to me that my choice was not at all accidental: television has turned out to be the best place for a cynic. It was through television that I had my first real experience with provincial girls. Under their carefully selected clothes, which do not set them apart in any way from all the others, provincial girls really do smell different.

The strict humanist-feminist in me refuses to accept this. The cynic simply smiles. I have noticed, however, that despite their provincialism, and because of their so-called low market value, these girls develop a peculiar, altogether new kind of determination. Who caused them to put on such airs? What are they hoping for? But it was too early for me to understand everything then.

Only now, after having spent a sufficiently long time there, is it clear to me that television is nothing but a form of modern demonism, created by technological means. Television is full of Dr Fausts, thus it follows that there must also be Margarets. But working inside offers you a unique opportunity for self-education. You see the human faces of all those stony figures whom you otherwise only know two-dimensionally, from posters or from pictures in the newspapers. You realize that journalists have a sorry profession, and then it becomes clear to you – it is not a profession, but a curse. An indelible brand that hangs like a millstone around their necks.

As with many other addictions, here, too, the victim wants to escape the vicious circle, but alone is unable to find in himself the will. Journalists should be pitied, and everyone should pray daily for the salvation of their souls, just as with drug addicts.

10 September, in a hotel room, night

Journalists do not like Pilar. They think she has usurped Christo, just as Yoko Ono took over John Lennon. They grudgingly call her an artist, only because she is with him, and most are sure that she holds him in some kind of mystical emotional bondage. That which I saw, however, was absolutely ordinary, trivial almost. Two elderly people, who hold hands like children. And with every passing year they grow more afraid of death, as does everyone.

From the first moment you see them they give the impression of lovers, which causes those in their presence to feel uncomfortable. During our meeting at the villa, I was frankly insolent. I wanted to show them I wasn't going to be fazed by anything, because I had my own opinions. The things I said were sufficiently distressing and threatened at any point to cause them to show me the door. Thus, I didn't have any time to feel uncomfortable about them themselves. I assume that they liked that.

Then, after dinner, I somehow stayed on, despite the fact that it was long since time for me to leave. I'm guessing you would not be able to like the real Rembrandt or Gaugin if you had lent them money or borrowed from them, or if they had invited you into their kitchens. I was supposed to see Christo only very briefly this time, which made me feel calmer.

11 September, early in the morning, at sunrise

Today will be a phenomenal day for New York, I'm guessing. They will let us up on the roof only at 8:30, when the unfurling of the cloth is already done.

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A long time ago, sometime. Five time-periods ago

A single period always turns out to last about five years. The further back and farther away, the harder it is to remember and to say I. There was a boy who unfortunately just didn't have what it takes to be a hooligan. Otherwise I would be able to hope that he would suddenly whip a slingshot out of his pocket and break the glass of the window I am looking through right now. Alas, even though he is new, the New Person cannot alter things of the past. The town, the resort, was empty. Its main attraction was its downtown, a single little square with an empty fountain.

There was a beer garden with tinted windows at one end. On Fridays and Saturdays vendors set up their stands next to the fountain. There you could find candy and toy acrobats

suspended on rubber bands between two parallel plastic sticks. There were marbles, beaded purses and colourful combs made of imitation bone.

On the square, too, spots of asphalt melted like chocolate on a stove, like puddles, little lakes, shadows on the pavement, which was coming apart. There was a sign that pointed the way to the lake with healing mud. Here he discovered something unusual. Someone had stuck a wad of gum on the lower-right corner of the sign. It was dried up and was so baked by the sun that when he tried to pick it off with his finger, it crumbled into pieces and disintegrated.

Chewing gum was not welcome here. He hadn't seen anyone chewing it, and he was the only one who blew bubbles. Yet he had not stuck the gum there. Who was it then? In all his days here he had yet to come across another child. Someone, small like himself, who had left a trace in the lower right-hand side of the sign, exactly as high as a child like him could reach. He continued chewing, even though the gum didn't taste good to him. The gum had been sitting too long on the shelves of the newspaper stand.

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The 14 days were up. The bus took them from the resort to the town and stopped on the square in front of the post office. They waited for the next bus to the city. There was another child there, a girl. She was sitting on a blue suitcase of imitation leather, in the sweltering shadow of the sheet metal bus stop. She was wearing a skirt, sandals, socks that were dirty from dust around the tips of her toes, a shirt with a button at her neckline and a wide-brimmed hat. I'm going to cry, I say to myself. I'm going to start bawling. I don't know who she was, I don't know, and I certainly don't remember anything at all at this point. But I know that it was her.

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"I'm going to cry," I say to myself every time, but precisely at the moment when the tears should spring into my eyes in order to fall and forsake me, suddenly my mouth begins grinning of its own accord. It stretches like the rubber mask of a clown. Without a doubt, I am the New Person. I don't feel misery and I don't feel sorrow, yet this doesn't cause me to be cynical. And here is the most horrifying thought: Am I not one of those people, who in crucial moments become so sickly sentimental that afterwards they must wash away their shame with a rush of cruelty?

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The two children had settled into a heavenly place, the very back seat. Beyond the large dusty window one could see the road, a field and machines moving along the road. The heat, not a person, was driving them. Dried-up butterflies were stuck to the glass. "What's your name?" I don't remember. I don't remember how I answered her. In such moments I don't even know my own name. "What's your name?" I don't remember what she answered. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, held by an elastic band. The band had two shiny plastic balls on it, blue and cream. He took the gum out of his pocket. The little squares were stuck together. He separated them and held them out on his open palm.

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The bus begins climbing the heights. The branches come together, the trees make a tunnel. After the tunnel the rain starts pouring down suddenly, the asphalt becomes blue. The windows are now crystalline, and the large rear window is now so clean that it almost disappears. They watch the road behind them fly away until they are dizzy. They managed to get married. They became man and wife, tying the knot with a red thread torn off his t-shirt. They tied their pinkies together, rather than their ring fingers, since the thread was too short. They kissed each other on the lips. They sat down and stood up. Before or after that they took apart a plastic pen and then couldn't put it back together. They also played doctor. They pulled the gum out of their mouths and put it back in again, stretching it like elastic. She turned and her shoulder touched his: "What are you going to give me as a present?"

He didn't know what he could give her. His toys were not there with him. His books were all in the suitcase below. And in any case they weren't exactly his, not like the toys at home. He began to feel bad about giving her anything, without even knowing what. He didn't feel like it, he felt selfish.

"I have a box," he said. "What kind?" she asked him. "But it got stolen," he said. "I could have given it to you as a present, it was very beautiful. But I don't have it anymore, so I can't give it to you." Why was he so reluctant to give her something, anything, of his? It was her, after all... I think that this question is one that will remain unanswered: why did he suddenly become such a cheapskate?

Along with the question of why she asked for a present in the first place. I have never asked anyone for a present. Because of this I've never been particularly happy to receive

presents. I think that the girl was Heliana. However I try to explain it, though, this belief remains baseless.

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His hands remained pressed together, the tip of one thumb touching the other, the index finger of his left hand touching the tip of his right index finger. The remaining fingers hung down and didn't touch each other. She stuck a finger into the square formed between his hands: "And what's in the box?" "I don't know anymore, it got stolen."

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The skyscrapers. Why did this view bring up all of that now? Two gigantic boxes, as if from my dreams. The cross-sections of both of them are square.

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Life is so short, I think to myself.

Christo and Pilar, they really love each other and don't give a rip about the rest of the world. They never get bored of thinking up new absurdities, since they come up with them together. And after that they patiently wait, perhaps for a whole eternity, for them to become reality. 11 September, 8:30 am The city is numb, it is beautiful. Like an angelic dove burrowed into the subway.

These are its wings. Your art is beautiful and majestic, Mr Yavashev, but I am not here to pay you compliments.

In this wind, however, it is impossible to smoke, you can't even light a cigarette. We stand at the top of the tower. It is now or never. But why am I making such a big deal of this? It may very well turn out that I don't see her. It may be that the moment is not right. It may be that she doesn't even remember me. Am I prepared for this final possibility? This would be much worse than her simply telling me: get the hell out of here, what made you come crawling back? The humiliation she has been heaping on me all this time, without even being aware of it.

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Are you afraid, Mr Christo? Did you imagine it being so very high?

You most likely are experiencing at least a slight fear of death, just as I am now: because of something unfinished, something that is always left over. Christo and Pilar, each on a different tower. Two people who never board the same airplane so that there will be someone to finish the work, if something were to happen.

Nothing more could ever happen between Heliana and me. I know this, and thus only as I joke I tell myself “It's now or never!” as I dial her phone number. This conversation will cost a fortune from the roof of the north tower in New York. How many times have I done it, there, on the opposite end of the earth, across miniature urban distances. Back then, I didn't bother to think about the cost, but now the final phase of my humiliation unexpectedly sticks out its tongue, taunting me with this bourgeois argument: it is not only absurd and degrading – it is also expensive.

I don't want to be the boy on the bus again, despite the fact that that was one of my happiest memories. I don't want to have to decide again what to give her as a present. I don't want anything – is that the answer? And, of course, now with my telephone in my hand, I don't want her to answer. I want to have never met her, perhaps – have I finally come to that? Is this my final wish? To have never met her and not to have known her?

This place is appropriate for prayer. Above us is only the sky, the air above the island of Manhattan. The island of the blessed.

11 September, 8:44 am

On the telephone – a long pause. A long pause, most likely the connection has broken up. After a long pause – Heliana's phone begins to ring.

But back to the matter at hand: what a day and what a city! Haughty needles in the sky, loners crowded together. Today is an exceptional day for aviation, a unique opportunity for travellers leaving the city from La Guardia in Queens or from Kennedy Airport. Pilots will receive permission to make a wide circle as they fly over Manhattan, over the view of the two skyscrapers in white down.

And look! I see from here one of the airplanes, as if on a panoramic raid above the river. For the first time I am so high up, yet still standing firmly on my own two feet. And eye to eye with a real live airplane. I can almost make out the design on its wings, and the company name: American Airlines.

It's no use. I'll let it ring one more time, but I'll probably get disconnected soon anyway. The phone continues to ring. There's no point, I think to myself. We are extinguished bodies, we are lost sources of light, empty wells, like knocked-over glasses.

Christo, Pilar – the happy ones are the minority. Few are the grown-ups who manage to remain children. Then, unexpectedly, a cloud blocks the sun with its shadow.

In 2001, the twin towers of the World Trade Center were destroyed, but afterwards – as a triumph, I would say, of the New Person – the Americans built them up again. For the opening of this most striking monument, as a monument to the monument itself, Christo was invited to wrap the skyscrapers.