

ZINCOGRAPH
by Vladislav Todorov

translated from the Bulgarian by Vladislav Todorov

Powder

A sense of profuse powdering, a funky smell of powder, cotton ball rubbing powder into oily pores, cheeks, temples, nose, chin, nostrils... His face lost its greasy luster and became a breathing fresco.

A sudden thought made him smile, but on the inside, with the back of his face lest the powder should spill – the thought of how Marie Antoinette's profusely powdered face rolled at the executioner's feet.

"You've got perfect skin." A coquettish female voice brought him back within the mirrored confines of the makeup room, "oily and elastic."

"Skin," he thought, "that's what's left of me."

The powdered man glanced through the door crack of the makeup room into the studio of the popular television show "Scaffold." The audience had taken their seats and now observed how the stage workers tested the joints of the Scaffold – a light fiberglass construction, a postmodern installation of sorts.

The former diva Vera Pavlov was the talk-show host. She had been reassigned to the National Television owing to advanced-stage bilateral flat-feet. This explained her army shoes and the haircut that matched the shoes. Her eyes -- wet and loving -- revealed her giving nature and constant readiness to breastfeed the starving populace. Vera had characteristically high cheekbones, plump lips, and a vibrant windpipe that could project her voice in the most acoustic ways. Her bust, secured in a tight corset, looked like a pair of river stones mounted on her otherwise fragile frame. A silver-clad ruby teardrop lodged peacefully in its massive groove. The hostess, frugally beautified, had the manners of a bashful yet sexually proficient headmistress. Two glands pulsed on her snow-white neck. Her entire organism was growing visibly agitated.

It was the year 1990 in a country best known for its yogurt and shooting umbrellas, but most importantly for its 1,309 year-old history of Great Khans, Tsars, and General Secretaries. The evening program of the National Television opened with "Scaffold" and closed at midnight

with "Naked News." Before the start of the show, in the stage wings, Vera performed her routine warm-up. She was very particular about it. She swung her body, stretched her arms, swayed her hips, rehearsed various facial contortions, tested her lungs, cleaned her windpipe, exercised her deep tobacco-stained voice by engaging it in unrestrained yodeling, and ran in circles while throwing her arms up in the air. Her entire body quivered as if dancing barefoot on live embers. Finally, she squeezed her voluptuous lips into a knot, sucked in her belly, and gave a series of guttural yelps "bi-ba-bu-be-bo." Suddenly, she grew quiet and spat in her bovine cleavage for courage.

The show was about to start. Its signal tore violently through the airways -- an orientalized phrase from the Marseillaise played on a berserk clarinet. Vera swung her bulk onto the stage with the gait of a polar bear rolling her eyeballs vivaciously. A wave of orchestrated ovations accompanied her much-awaited appearance. She embraced the stuffy air in front of her, greeted the audience and announced energetically:

"Everybody, meet our guest Mister Chamov, founding member of the largest anticommunist movement 'Horn of Democracy' and Deputy Chairman of the Constituent Assembly."

Enter Chamov – well-powdered, leggy and bulky. Casual chic became him. Dressed in an impeccable blue suit, cotton shirt, no necktie, he walked in uneasily, looking somewhat dejected. Everything about him spoke of strong willpower and ironclad integrity: his massive chin, bulgy brow, shapeless behind, sloping shoulders, powdered face, mocking eyes, throaty voice, and well-groomed forelock. In a nutshell: an accomplished misanthrope and dandy. Thunderous applause forced his face into a painful smile. Showered by the humming lights his skin felt as if it were burning.

"Good evening, sir!" Vera grew ecstatic.

"Good evening." His cartilaginous larynx moved up like a piston and he swallowed noisily.

"Before we climb up the Scaffold where the hour of truth will strike for you, I want you to answer the three questions of the show. As always, they were randomly selected by a computer from all questions ever asked by journalists in this country. Are you ready for this?"

"Yes, I am."

Vera received three envelopes, opened the first one, and almost chanted:

"Have you ever killed a man?" Her eyes sunk deep into his powdered face.

"Yes." He answered bluntly.

"Who?"

"Myself."

"When?" Her eyes kept him on the edge.

"In the spring of '89."

"So, you've been dead for almost a year now."

"Yes, I have."

"Awesome!" She exclaimed, "Let's move on to the next question." She opened the second envelop and read as follows:

"What would you say if they told you that you had bad breath?"

"My soul is stale." He answered at once.

"Sharp and aphoristic," she noted promptly, "You've got one hell of a bouncy wit there."

"A politician's," He added.

"What makes you laugh?" She read the third question.

"Man stumbling."

"Goodness!" She ejaculated, but her zeal for the unmentionable secrets remained unquenched. "Now we'll rise on the Scaffold where the Hour of Truth will strike." She took Chamov by the hand and made his palm sweat. He felt contaminated.

Scaffold

Vera dragged her guest to the top of the screeching Scaffold, which was so designed, as to allow her bulk to negotiate effectively its way up the winding steps while she swung her hips between its joints, planks and railing. Finally, she rested her body in something that resembled a

fabulous shimmery nest knit together by interlocking aluminum and fiberglass tubes. He positioned himself opposite her, feeling visibly perturbed, even panicky, as if seated in a nest of snakes.

The signal wailed once again as sharp and frenzied as before and suddenly broke and there was silence.

"You wish to make a confession, here, live, on the air?"

"Yes, I do."

"Let's hear it."

Pause.

"I've got a thick..." His voice sagged inside his chest but then came back with the word, "... dossier."

"What dossier?"

"... of an informant."

"What?!" She moaned emphatically.

"You heard me."

"You must be kidding!"

"No I'm not. In the spring of '89, less than a year ago, I was recruited and served as a secret police collaborator for several months. Then the Berlin Wall came down and it was all over."

"Hold it right there!" She rolled her eyeballs tempestuously. "We just made some goddamn shocking news!"

Vera struck an odd pose and stabbed the air with a bony finger, which triggered a loud volley of applause. With a wide gesture she sort of scooped them up with her bare hands and threw them down to the ground to silence them, and there was silence. "What's the name of your recruiting officer?" Her jewelry rattled.

"Krum Nozharov."

"Which department?"

"SEX-POL."

The powdered face of the guest grew long and flat, as if he were trying to desert it.

"Less than a year, you said..." Her eyelids dropped lazily, "... it's like it almost never happened!"

"Yes it did, and it's forever! In a moral universe," he pointed out with a sonorous voice, "time doesn't flow. It has no length. Short or long, a second or a whole life -- it doesn't make any difference, things happen forever!"

"What made you speak out tonight?" Vera softened her grip on the guest and then rolled a compassionate eye across his face, as if she felt a sudden urge to lick his shame away.

The guest regained his composure, put his forelock in order and continued with his confession.

"I refuse to be a hostage to the past and to former spooks who try to cash in on my dossier. The archive of the former machinery of terror is an arsenal of time bombs. We hear them go off ever so often. I cannot keep quiet anymore and live with the debilitating premonitions that the time has come for my bomb to explode in my face any moment now. I want to wake up just once with a clear conscience and at peace with myself. I am prepared to face the consequences whatever they might be. I know there are many people just like me who silently carry this fulminating load and I dare them speak out. Expose yourselves! Fall on your knees and repent! Otherwise you will keep crawling through this minefield scared senseless like smugglers of your own disgrace and will watch how others blow up until it's you... The opening of the secret police archives will not save us from the ghosts of the past unless we break the locks of our souls and minds, let light and air in, and then forgive each other. My fellow men, you sorry shadows in the kingdom of darkness, do not squeeze your tormented souls in your sweating palms. I've sinned, forgive me..."

The signal slashed him short and the Scaffold shuddered with the final volley of applause joined by the hostess with all of her muscular strength. Soap bubbles started to rain down, creating a rainbow above the Scaffold, popping and turning into tiny puddles as they touched the ground. The guest had bent in half, as if eviscerated by the signal.

The weather-forecast blasted to the screen in the make-up room. Chamov was trying to get rid of the powder by rubbing his face violently with a wet towel. The sour smell of it made him gag for a split second. He threw the towel in the see-through garbage bin, then sat on the edge of the chair with a benumbed face and fixed his eyes on the weather girl – a round-faced graciously-breathing Balkan Madonna brimming with lard and a perky behind outfitted in Turkish pants. Her bare shoulders followed a cyclone on the map. Upon finishing the forecast, she bent forward and looked straight at the lens. Her melon breasts swung forth, she winked at poor Chamov and said naughtily:

"The weather is never the same."

On the day after

Chamov's confession was plastered all over the front pages of the major newspapers illustrated with stills from last-night's "Scaffold". The spin-doctors of the democratic opposition were summoned at the IC-IA (Institute for Counter-Intuitive Approaches) to assess the situation and hammer out damage-control strategies.

The speakers of the center-right parties offered the standard commentaries complaining about the invisible arm of the already-dismantled totalitarian regime, which evidently manipulated the leadership of the biggest anticommunist formation "The Horn of Democracy." They urged the government to promptly declassify the former secret police archives, so that the people could finally see who the puppets and who the puppeteers were in this country.

The morning talk-shows opened with detailed reviews of the papers with special focus on Chamov's confession. "Sudden Dawn" anchored by P. Petrov, had invited for commentary a very serious personage – the retired brass K. Kamenov, one of the engineers of the former apparatus of terror. What he had to say about Chamov set in motion a chaotic pendulum that would define the pulse of time in the country for months to come.

"General, how much longer do we need to play this hide-and-snoop game?" the Anchor asked.

K. Kamnov bristled up ferociously and yelped with a commanding voice:

"Petrov, pay attention! I am a proud Bulgarian General, and not some sorry snoop. My rank and heavy-weight epaulettes compel me to say here on the air that a department SEX-POL never existed in the former Homeland Security." He shook his head violently and his hair fluffed up. "I repeat, please open your ears, such a department -- never existed!" He waved menacingly a malformed trigger finger with a missing nail.

"Is that a fact?" Petrov was genuinely puzzled.

"It's THE fact, boy."

"This means that Chamov is lying."

"Of course he's lying."

"But why would he lie? He is a man of integrity, a highly revered architect of the democratic process, a giant reformer and Deputy Chairman of the Constituent Assembly."

"This so-called confession is nothing but inflammatory crap concocted by a conniving intellectual impostor. He threw a stink-bomb right in the middle of the intelligence community with the clear task of vilifying those self-sacrificial agents who quietly crushed the enemy on the Cold War fronts." The General's eyes developed a sinister glitter, as if a toxic vision possessed him, "This nation ought to erect a colossal monument or at least a sizable fresco representing the unknown spy as a collective hero. I am talking about an awe-inspiring artwork that symbolizes the clandestine deeds of these quiet troopers who risk their life for duplicitous slicks like Chamov... Nation, rise as one and sculpt their glory. The time has come for us to compose epic operas and grand spectacles, ala Homer goddamn it!"

"You are the founder of 'Quiet Watch: Popular Movement for Leaderless Vigilance.' What's your objective?" said the Anchor promptly changing the subject after the General grew visibly combustive.

"Yes Petrov, I'll tell you right way. Here we are a humble group of declassified officers who, together with the 'Poets with Holsters,' have decided to open a bank account. Thus we call upon all patriots regardless of their political color, walk of life or moral convictions to contribute funds for the purpose of..." He pulled a piece of cardboard from under the table and read from it the following phrase, "The granite immortalization of the faceless heroes of the CWF," which stood for the Cold War Front. The General looked at the camera and almost chanted, "Any

amount of leva counts!" He waved a banknote and roared, "Nation, you must never sleep ..." The General suddenly panicked, "No, no, don't get me wrong! Don't worry! Sleep tight! On your behalf, we'll keep an eye on you!"

Upon finishing his tirade the General tossed his hair back, ruffled his eyebrows, scribbled with a crayon on the flip side of the cardboard the bank account number and stuck it in the eye of the camera.

Before the end of the day the Speaker of the Ministry of the Interior made a statement on the issue at a special press conference, which in effect confirmed the General's words. The statement vehemently denied that department SEX-POL had ever existed and that an officer by the name of Krum Nozharov had ever worked in the former political police structures.

The statement was supported by a coordinated media campaign launched by the intelligence community. Former secret-police officers, now prominent security experts, offered commentaries that tried to turn the general public against the anticommunist opposition, exposing its lame attempt to crack the national security shield.

Intellectuals for hire and freethinkers readily available to smash the square heads of all former hardliners mounted a vicious counterattack against the remnants of the former machinery of terror euphemistically called the "intelligence community." A fervent bunch of civil rights activists and cavaliers of free speech signed fiery petitions that called for public self-flagellation and the immediate resignation of General Kamenov, as well as Chamov, and all moles entrenched in the rank and file of the democratic front who undermined the public trust in the authentic origin of the anticommunist right.

Independent experts and political analysts mobilized by the IC-IA publicized a statement which read as follows: "Time and time again our young civil society finds itself hovering in the air, on a plane with no pilot in the cockpit, watching from above leftwing maneuvers on the rightwing front."

The document went on to discuss extensively the cultural leap of this Balkan country from the Oriental geopolitical basin into the Occidental one and the need of a certifiably competent pilot in the cockpit during the time of such a leap. Finally, the document climaxed in the following convoluted sentence:

"The Chamov affair is a major screw in the social-engineering machine of the former political police that had surreptitiously created the official organizations of the anticommunist opposition in an effort to place it under police control and manipulation while seeking to create a climate of opportunistic moderation and reconciliatory dialogism between all major adversaries on the stage of national politics. In such times when the entire country is caught in a pilotless geopolitical hovering, to throw the opposition into a panic would serve only the shady purpose of the 'missing' pilot."

Stake

The affair acquired ominous proportions after "The Horn of Democracy" made a shocking announcement. It turned out that Chamov had embezzled a large sum of money in an effort to ransom his dossier. At once, a monster media armed to the teeth with video and audio gizmos deployed its blabbering forces in front of Chamov's house on "Graf" Street. Chamov had barricaded himself in his loft, which was located at the top of the building, having no intention of facing the reporters. According to his neighbors, he hadn't left his place for days. He wouldn't let anyone in. He received his papers and nothing else, not even food.

Chamov had found himself surrounded by filth-thirsty cameras and microphones, forced to surf a rising wave of public intolerance. On the third day of the media siege, a ringing telephone flew out of his window and landed on the reporters camping in the street.

The escalating media frenzy on "Graf" Street was causing major problems in the life of the city. The headstrong crowd of kibitzers and loafers was growing by the minute. Its behavior oscillated between angry whimpering and murderous outcry. From the nearby open-air book market, someone fetched a whole bunch of copies of Chamov's pamphlet "Right-mindedness," dedicated to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The crowd dumped them on the sidewalk and trampled them while chanting frantically "Police pigeon - police stool!" After they got tired of doing this, everyone took a copy of the trampled book, piled them up in front of the building entrance, poured gasoline on the heap and set it on fire. The blaze scorched the nearby dead tree. The fire-brigade arrived with a wailing siren, which for a brief moment chilled the madding crowd. Firemen put out the fire blasting it with foam. Finally, night fell over the city and covered it with a sour-sweet blanket of fog.

The new day was dawning over the media camp where fatigued reporters had swooned into deaf slumber. Camouflaged with the gown of fog, a sleepy cameraman struggling with an early morning erection was trying to urinate behind a gutter. At this moment, the dim figure of a man in a sky-blue suit and patent-leather shoes glided along the roof edge of the building. The figure stood still and snuffed the air for a moment, then leaned precariously forward like a drunken gargoyle right above the smoky spot of cremated books. He snuffed the air once again and somewhat hesitated. Against the backdrop of the dawning sky, the figure seemed to take off. In a second, a body hit the ground with a thud, which the soundless fog swallowed at once.

Dawn sluggishly percolated through the diaper of the fog corroding it with rusty light. Suddenly a shriek tore through it. An old woman, shopping bag in hand, stood petrified before the cold mass of ashes. A lifeless body with broken face and patent-leather shoes lay prostrate at her feet. A thick kasha-puddle of soot, foam and blood was taking shape around the remains. Chamov was no more.

Next, hordes of reporters in full gear rushed into the building, up the stairs and into the apartment. They found the door wide open. On the wall above the desk there hung Nietzsche's portrait with the following deep thought printed underneath: "What does not kill me makes me stronger."

On the desk next to the typewriter lay a document, freshly typed and autographed, entitled "My Confession." On the title page, in feverish handwriting, Chamov had scribbled: "God, forgive me! Off I go to feed the media."

The police arrived at the crime scene moments after the media invasion, but failed to seize the document. Someone had already smuggled it out of the apartment together with the typewriter. The police ransacked the place in an effort to recover evidence that could establish the facts and answer the question -- was this a case of, quote: "a genuine suicide or foul play?" Was Chamov forced to fly off the roof?

A copy of the confession was leaked to the police by an anonymous source accompanied by a note stating that the original document together with the typewriter had been taken out of the country for security reasons. Based on the document the police concluded as follows: "Chamov had taken his own life voluntarily and uncompelled by force."

Soon selected phrases and whole paragraphs were leaked to the tabloids. They offered a detailed description of the safe house called the "Bunker," which was said to have on display a bizarre collection of stuffed rodents with red-bead eyes.

The Beacon of Lie

History feeds on chaos. On November 9, 1989 the Berlin Wall came down. The next day the Bulgarian Communist Dictator was removed from power by an internal party coup led by the Soviet proxy in the Central Committee. The budding anticommunist opposition was legalized, the apparatus of terror was dismantled, and the first free elections were announced. The communists prepared to face the wrath of the people and switch to a mode of leaderless manipulation of the political and economic transformation of the country. Essential parts of the secret-police archives were promptly destroyed in an effort to keep the moles in the flowerbeds of the budding democracy. The police knew that those who controlled the moles controlled the root process.

Panic-stricken, the Red Lizard was trying to lose its tail and cover its tracks. But the country spoke with a booming voice and voted the Reds back into power. Much to their dismay, the anticommunists remained in opposition, utterly embarrassed by the popular vote. Freedom failed to deliver Justice for all, as it turned out that the people loved the most those whom they feared the most.

The Constituent Assembly convened to draft a new constitution. The Communist Party, holding the ruling majority, formed the new government and changed its name to the socialist party, officially lowering its capital letters and rejecting its totalitarian past. At the same time, hardcore unyielding communists demonstratively left their newly prettified party and tried to engage the masses in the creation of a True Communist Party. Numerous such parties mushroomed throughout the country. At some point they outnumbered their combined membership.

The situation in the country was utterly exacerbated when the indignant leaders of the opposition declared a chain hunger strike under the slogan: "Dead or Alive -- united we stand against the Lie!" A tent city grew up between the Archeological Museum and the Presidency, across the street from the former Communist Party Headquarters. The people named it "City of Truth." The leaders of the opposition moved there and pledged to starve themselves to death in

the company of vigilant civil-rights activists, members of the erudite academic elite and alert citizens. The leaders drew lots in an effort to determine their turn in the chain hunger strike. A special tent was assembled in the heart of the City of Truth to host the *de-facto* starving leader. It brandished on its top a blue lamp and a loudspeaker. The *de-facto* starving leader was properly wired as to allow the lamp and the speaker to receive his vital signs, pulse and heartbeat. The lamp blinked with a steady frequency measuring the pulse while the speaker broadcast the monotonous heartbeat: "dup-dup-dup-dup."

The City of Truth was soon packed with a tempestuous multitude of overly conscious citizens who spat at the Party Headquarters sidewall and cursed the red star that shone on its top as the beacon of the Lie. The anger grew into rage when suddenly the *de-facto* starving leader changed his position on the issue of how exactly to go about defeating the Lie. Instead of starving himself to death he broke free from the wires, dragged himself out of the tent, and with a feeble voice spearheaded the storming of the Party Headquarters. Doors and windows flew open. Tides of unrestrained citizens rushed inside the building. The raging mob ravaged the marble corridors and veneered offices, tore apart the furniture, smashed the communist insignia and set the building on fire from four ends.

Meanwhile, the torpid masses watched and went on living their lives, fed up with public spectacles, demagoguery and charades. Pensioners with rotten-teeth stuffed themselves with greasy porridge amidst stashes of canned food, loaves of stale bread and the like edible garbage. Their dentures rattled, their swollen feet tapped bare floors and their insides rumbled joyfully. Love-birds in prefabricated apartments munched on bluish lard and funky kasha, and sporadically copulated on inflatable mattresses to perpetuate their kin. Thick-necked organized-crime leaders scratched their hairy beer bellies, puffed magic dragons in the company of berserk pit bulls and hot bimbos who belly-danced with pierced clits and gave them head. Gypsies popped lice and read palms surrounded by a sea of scrap-metal, mangled gutters, broken pipes, rails, twisted wire and banged-up bronze statues of resistance fighters. The glaucomatous General Secretary, just ousted kept his butt warm under house arrest nesting in a loveseat and sucking on a candy bar while mending his socks and blinking twitchily behind thick glasses. Next to him there stood a stocky mirthless firefighter -- his bodyguard, who massaged his meaty ears while watching the breaking news about the SEX-POL affair.

Phantom's Nest

The Ministry of the Interior received anonymous calls from people who said that they had also collaborated with the department in question and knew the safe-house. They provided a detailed portrait of Krum Nozharov. The mysterious conspirator was fond of plaid and would often wear a necktie of yellow on tiny black squares. He had a scar on his right eyebrow. The security experts agreed that they were dealing with a weird case of serial fraud, a pseudo-clandestine scheme they had never seen before. A special investigator with extraordinary prerogatives was appointed -- Major Kokalov. A 24 hour Tip Hotline was opened. The police offered a hefty award for the call that would lead to the apprehension of the bogus secret agent who went by the name of Krum Nozharov.

The safe house was carefully examined. It was located on "Tsar Simeon" Street #30 -- a yellowish oblong building that looked like a cowshed. It had two wings -- a kitchen and a room situated on both sides of the entrance door. The neighborhood consisted of similarly decrepit cabins and hovels surrounded by junkyards, body-shops, and lumber-mills. The house looked deserted.

Next to the entrance door there was a massive stone plaque featuring a roughly carved rugged face of a man and the following inscription: "In this house lived Krum Nozharov, amateur singer and resistance-assistant, born in the rebellious village of Thorn Apple. In the winter of 1943-1944 here found refuge urban guerrillas and freedom fighters, illegal and semi-legal daughters and sons of the communist underground." It became clear that the most wanted suspect had lifted his name from the memorial plaque.

The house had a tiny yard with wild vegetation, thorn apples and degenerate fruit-trees. In the backyard there stood a decaying outhouse overgrown with poison ivy. The interior of the house looked neat although dusty. The kitchen was narrow and long. The legs of a massive iron-cast range sunk in the rotten floor. The room was divided by a heavy theater curtain made of faded navy blue plush featuring a flamboyant phoenix resurrecting from its ashes. Behind the curtain was the bedroom, in front of it -- the living room. On the wall hung an old bamboo fishing rod equipped with an antiquated reel, Champagne cork for a float, a teeth-marked lead for a

sinker, and a dry sunfish caught on a rusty hook. In the bedroom – metal bed with a pastoral scene on the headboard. In the living room – a chest, a table, an entertainment center with peeling veneer and an empty fish tank full of little river stones with three dry fish. Behind the thick glass of the entertainment center there was a bizarre collection of lined-up stuffed rodents with fake red-bead eyes.

The house belonged to Stephanie Tribelly, former activist on the Cultural Front, a barren widow and pensioner, who had vanished without a trace. The neighbors testified that long ago she moved in with relatives in the countryside and no one had seen her since. Reportedly, she rented out the house to a neat young man. He remodeled it, lived in it for a while and then vanished. There was no official record of the tenant, but the description given by witnesses came close to the profile of the wanted man.

Major Kokalov traced the roots of the Tribelly family back to the small Thracian town of North Yeast. From Stephanie's nephew he learned that in the fall of 1988 she had moved in with them and had rented out her house in the capital city. Stephanie had a peppery temper and explosive character. She was a heavysset virile woman, a spitfire with deeply shaved calves. One night they fought over real estate, and the fight quickly grew physical. She smashed a priceless collection of clay figures and split in half an ancient icon used in live-ember dancing. The next morning she packed and left. They hadn't seen her since and didn't want to see her ever again.

The police tossed the safe-house, emptied the stove, sent the ashes to the lab, searched the yard thoroughly, but to no avail. Filled with despair, Kokalov was sitting in the kitchen staring at the wall with a vacuous look on his face. The wall was covered with oriental tapestry featuring an Odalisque in the lap of a Bedouin riding a thick-lipped camel on the backdrop of a large dune and a minaret. Suddenly, it dawned on him that the tapestry was hiding something. They removed it. One part of the wall was roughly patched. They tore the wall down to discover a boudoir of sorts, but quite primitive. It was a walk-in closet that contained stacks of oversize underwear, a large oval mirror, and a folding table covered with jars of pomades and ointments. In a revolving chair, Stephanie's remains rested. They were clad in a bizarre custom-made corset – a bra-vest of waterproof canvas with stays and polyethylene strings with a rolling pin entangled in them. Evidently, the landlady had been killed in the boudoir and her body had been immured.

The next day Kokalov received an envelope containing a piece of audiotape with Chamov's voice in the background of an operating belt-saw. He addressed someone by the name of Nozharov: "... object Volga ordered through the international interlibrary loan Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. She plans to conduct a comparative study of sex and work accidents." The envelope contained also a piece of paper with a message composed of letters cut out from newspapers: "The Archive of Department SEX-POL goes on sale. Wait for instructions in a separate envelope." Signed: Zincograph. The stamp indicated that the package had come from Vienna.

Interior Profundities

Portraits of great Khans, Tsars and Leaders hung on the long marble walls. Major Kokalov with a strained face was limping down the corridor that led to the office of the Minister of the Interior. He wore an orthopedic shoe on his left foot, which was visibly shorter than the right one. On his left cheek he had a scar from a bullet, which lent some severity to his otherwise baby-face. His chin was warped. This impaired his speech. His teeth slightly gnashed as he marched with the attempted strut of a line-officer. Kokalov was called upon to brief the Minister on the most recent developments in the SEX-POL affair.

"May I come in?" Kokalov's voice screeched as he entered the office of the Minister.

"Talk to me, Kokalov!" The Minister's falsetto indicated severe indigestion.

"Sir, this whole affair looks... how to put it -- wacky."

"How wacky?"

"Wicked wacky!"

"Explain."

"In all likelihood we are dealing with a former secret police operative who's gone mental."

The Minister listened with a sour look on his face. Acidic food was surging back in his esophagus. His face contorted and his neck stretched as he attempted a soundless belch.

"Cunning manipulation," Kokalov waited for the Minister to tame his internal organs and then added, "Launched by some overly creative maniac, a self-styled and totally deranged secret

agent, an underground predator preying on unsuspecting people under our nose. Hiding in his burrow he fleeces his victims mercilessly. A year ago, these victims used to be publicly inconsequential intellectual misfits, a bunch of gibbering fools." Kokalov demonstratively paused, growing visibly gratified with the way his train of thought was going. "Today, however, they are media personae, big-shot reformers and statesmen. They could easily sway public opinion against us. Their exposure as victims of a shady machine for public discredit could cause turmoil of unforeseen proportions with perilous consequences for the country and most importantly for this administration. It's a matter of national security."

"Wait, wait," the Minister broke in, interrupting Kokalov's soliloquy. "What did Chamov say that was plastered all over the front pages of the morning papers?"

"Off I go to feed the media," or something to that effect."

"I think someone else said that."

"I am not aware..." Kokalov shrugged.

"It'll come to me. Now, give me the scoop."

"We are totally in the dark regarding SEX-POL. The fact is that we've never, never had such a department."

"What on earth does SEX-POL stand for? Secret Expedition and Probing Odd Liaisons, or what?"

"It beats me!"

"Beats us -- is that what you are trying to say to me?"

"I just don't want us to jump prematurely to any conclusions."

"What about this safe-house?"

"The so-called 'safe-house' belongs to Stephanie Tribelly. Her dead body turned up yesterday."

"Murdered?"

"Decomposed," Kokalov's teeth chattered. "Krum Nozharov turned up, too."

"We got him!"

"No, I mean the name, not the person. We found the name carved on a memorial plaque on the façade of the safe-house."

At that moment the Minister began to stir soda bicarbonate in a glass of water with a silver teaspoon. It tapped repeatedly on the glass wall, which lightened up the moment. He gulped the liquid down and positioned himself for a sudden belch. The chemical reaction produced an enormous amount of gas in his stomach and he spoke with a gassy voice.

"Bamboozlement... Sick stuff Kokalov ... on account of what you said about the former gibbering fools and present-time celebrities, we need to handle this situation with the utmost care. Smoke the charlatan out together with his machine of public discredit, but at the same time coif the whole affair accordingly for the public eye.

"I understand," Kokalov said thoughtfully, "but the fact is that our original statement denied the existence of such department. This is the truth, the very truth. However, in the light of the new developments that indicate that SEX-POL might have existed, the Ministry could easily become a laughing-stock, viewed as an incompetent institution, ignorant of its own affairs."

"Alter the truth," the Minister banged on the table with his fist and the teaspoon chimed joyfully in the glass, "accordingly!"

"Yes Sir, but how do you mean 'accordingly'?"

"I meant what I said -- accordingly!"

After long turbulent debates considering all the possible scenarios and covering all possible angles, Kokalov and his crew drafted and submitted an amended statement to the Chancellery of the Minister. The Speaker delivered it at a special press conference aired live on national TV. It read as follows:

"In compliance with the standard declassification procedure, the Ministry of the Interior is now in the position to announce publicly the existence of Department SEX-POL -- acronym for Secret Expedition and Probing Odd Liaisons -- under the auspices of the former secret police. The Department was created in the spring of last year by a top secret circular that provided the bases for the implementation of, quote: 'temporary regulative-preventive measures for the covert prophylactic neutralization of certain acutely maleficent elements and their attempts to discredit the political system in our People's Republic by means of manipulative bending of the general

truth and premeditated abuse of the spirit of Glasnost and Perestroika,' end of quote. The Department was dismantled in the fall of last year after the Berlin Wall came down. Its archive was transferred to the Communist Party Archives. During the recent attack, looting, and subsequent arson of the Communist Party Headquarters, a good part of the documentation of Department SEX-POL vanished. Certain items may have been stolen by delinquent protesters and looters. The Ministry of the Interior is taking all possible measures to prevent any misuse of those items."

Thus, before the eyes of the nation a top secret department called SEX-POL was retroactively manufactured to become a part of the already disbanded national security apparatus of the former communist regime. The Ministry came clean about this mindboggling affair, while Kokalov and his crew could now proceed with the eradication of the surreptitious threat.

Ten Years Earlier

Kira, holding a puberty-stricken boy by the hand, bashfully stepped inside the Juvenile Re-education Facilities in the residential district of "Hope." Her other hand clutched a book quire with crumpled pages. She was the sort of hag whose flesh was slowly drying on her bones. Her deep-set eyes, emaciated lips, and flabby ears spoke of her embattled past.

The Pedagogue on duty met them sitting behind a heavy mahogany desk situated in the shades of a branchy philodendron. He was outfitted in a white synthetic shirt showing salty stains under the armpits and an elastic necktie that looked like a lewd garter. On the desk stood a massive paper-punch, military inventory. A huge portrait of Makarenko hung on the wall next to a bookshelf stacked with propaganda brochures and pamphlets. It depicted the legendary Soviet educator surrounded by a bunch of jubilant boys with red scarves, and a jubilant boy on his lap. The desk drawer was wide open. Inside it a magazine of foreign origin sported pictures of sex-bombs mutilated with a paper-punch. When Kira knocked on the door, the Pedagogue kept his cool and slowly pushed the drawer leaving it ajar. His teeth clenched and he smiled to meet the visitors.

"May I," muttered a visibly embarrassed Kira as she pushed the boy forward.

"What brings you here, comrade?" The Pedagogue showed her the chair.

"The boy," Kira answered, sitting on the edge of the chair with the boy standing next to her. "He troubles me Comrade Pedagogue, deeply. How shall I put it ... oh, poor me..."

"Share and feel better, comrade. I am the Pedagogue on duty and this is what I do. I help those who share."

"His onanism... I am afraid ... has become incurable."

"How old is he?" The Pedagogue asked, unperturbed by the news and glancing at the boy.

"Eighth grade."

"How are you two related?"

"I'm his aunt, mother that is. He's adopted."

"What's his name?"

"Batko."

"Batko? What a name!"

"It implies seniority, Comrade Pedagogue. It calls for respect."

"It calls for ridicule, if you ask me."

"Don't say that, Comrade Pedagogue."

Kira pushed Batko forward and he promptly jumped on the Pedagogue's lap, copying his action from the portrait.

"As we eat dinner," Kira continued, visibly moved by the enterprising boy, "all of a sudden he jumps, rushes to the toilet and stays there for hours. His food gets cold. He loses appetite. I caught him using literature." She handed over the pages and inquired, "Comrade Pedagogue, which would be the competent legal authorities that could help me fight this plague?"

"Onanism, comrade otherwise known as masturbation, is ineradicable. It's been well known to us since time immemorial. Public intolerance has always existed and the fight against it began well back in Biblical times. God, you know, struck dead the first masturbator by the name of Onan, hence onanism. He was a minor biblical figure from the Book of Genesis but a major headache. He spilled his semen on barren ground the way he saw fit, indiscriminately wasting it while in pursuit of surrogate or non-vaginal satisfaction by means of manual stimulation of the

genital that serves the reproductive gland..." The Pedagogue paused to catch his breath. "Be that as it may, according to the law of the land, onanism does not constitute juvenile delinquency, or crime, or any other statutory offense..."

The Pedagogue pushed Batko away and stood up, flipped his boner and went to the bookshelf, pulled a thick book named "Pedagogical Poem" and handed it to Kira saying:

"Read, science has spoken."

"What about pornography?" She pointed at the pages.

"This book quire is well known to us. It's been torn out from an officially published book, *Rabbit, Run*. It must be library inventory. We'll locate the library and restore it to them."

"Is it a book for children?"

"No, it isn't, but these particular pages drive pubescent youth crazy, domestically and internationally. In fact, it's been banned two times in America for the same reason."

"He won't listen," Kira complained, changing the subject, "says he cannot stand me, threatens to leave me for good."

"Find a way to refocus his mind. Onanism should be substituted by creative or labor-intensive activities." The Pedagogue looked at the boy reproachfully. "Does he exhibit any extra-curricular interests?"

"He loves logic puzzles."

"What's that?" The Pedagogue grew suspicious.

"The crime-solving puzzles in *Cosmos* magazine."

"*Cosmos* magazine keeps our youth away from masturbation."

"I sure hope so," she said worriedly.

"Military service curbs masturbation too."

"Is this dangerous for the health?"

"Makarenko says," the Pedagogue pointed at the portrait, "Masturbation is only one step away from epilepsy."

Service Makes the Man

It happened in October, a month after he was drafted. The platoon where Private Batko Stamenov served was sent to guard an ammunition dump outside the garrison. The location was a forested hill with coniferous shrubbery surrounded by a boggy ravine and secured by barbwire fence. It was situated in the middle of a vast field overgrown with thorny weeds and wild plum trees. The platoon was stationed in a compound nested in the folds of the terrain. The soldiers on guard followed winding routes and trails with watchtowers. A range of white rocks overlooked the field. The food came already cooked in caldrons. The rookies off guard went on fatigue duty. The only time when they would be left alone, not in danger of being harassed by the senior soldiers, was while on guard walking the routes.

It was a mellow sunny afternoon. Batko rested his bones on a mossy stump. His eyes drifted disengaged across the hazy void that unfolded around him. Suddenly, his gaze hit a mirage-like figure in the far distance. He looked through his binoculars and saw a Gypsy wagon crossing the field. The warped figure of a woman separated itself from the wagon and started to move methodically from one tree to the next like a giant ant, getting closer and closer to the fence.

Batko jumped to his feet and dashed down the slope to repel the intruder. He halted at the forest edge and looked around. Next to the barbwire fence an old Gypsy woman was picking fallen fruit off the ground in a plastic bag. Batko neared her stealthily from behind and yelped in an effort to startle her:

"Hey you... yes you, get out of here! This is a secure area."

"Ay!" the Gypsy woman squealed. "You scared the bejesus out of me, boy."

"Get lost!" He snapped at her.

"OK, OK, just a moment, let me finish." She kept toiling and jabbering. "Look at that, pretty boy, look at the harvest, look at these beautiful plums. It's a shame to let them rot. Here, catch one." She tossed him a plum. "It's so sweet and sugary, so fragrant and brimming with juices that it'll make you melt inside." She bent down and continued her harvest.

Batko caught the plum and shouted:

"Get lost I said! Don't try to bamboozle me, woman, or I'll empty the machinegun in your bony ass."

Unperturbed, the old Gypsy stood up and jerked the bag, which looked almost full. She set it on the ground, picked a couple of better-looking plums and took several timid steps towards Batko.

"Freeze, you hag, stand still! Don't you dare move!"

She froze and then stretched her arm with an open palm in an effort to safely hand him the plums.

"Take it boy, sweeten up your mouth. I'm not the enemy, boy. I'm not the devil. I just need to make some brandy and all ... to survive the winter, you know."

He took the plums and waved the gun in her face.

"This rot will get me the slammer. Get lost at once, bootlegger."

She flipped her eyes roguishly and tried to soften his resolve with sweet talk and a conniving smile.

"In the mood for a girl, boy?"

He looked at her bewildered.

"Say I bring you a girl, huh?"

"What girl? Some wizened witch like you..."

His body shuddered. A sudden temptation ran through it like a bolt of lightning.

"A nymph, boy, I'm am talking about a Gypsy nymph, wild and sweet, smelling like a mountain berry, her body -- quick and fey, as clean as a dewdrop -- a fleshy juicy fig for the most deserving troops..."

"Girl, you say..." He interrupted her incantation.

"Yes boy, yes! This is my blood I'm talking about, a beloved child and a precious slattern." Her eyes gaped emphatically. "Just let me pick the fallen fruit along the wire and off I go to fetch you the nymph."

It took him time to process the proposal with his brain, with his skin, with his entire being. Something melted within him and began to quicken like a massive drop of quicksilver. A hot wave surged inside his throat and started down flooding his stomach and boiling his groins.

He had never had a girl, never had the chance to know one. He always waited and waited for this thing to happen to him somehow by itself, without pursuing it actively. And the moment had come, just now, after he had banned the thought of it, with two years of military service ahead of him.

"A girl..." He almost choked on the word, "bring me one."

"When?"

"At one hundred," He replied, barely audibly.

Batko knew that the old soldiers would all be drunk and rowdy by that time and wouldn't make the effort to check the rookies on guard.

"Right here?" She looked at him conspiratorially.

"Right here," he confirmed, preparing to go.

The old Gypsy bent over and continued to comb the ground.

"Finish up once and get lost. If the sergeant major sees you, he'll mop the barracks with you."

She nodded without looking at him.

The fog thickened with nightfall. The dinner was potatoes cooked in tallow. They put the caldron on the stove to warm it up. The food burned. The rookies were blamed for mishandling the fire. They were ordered to eat the burned potatoes, which they scraped off the bottom of the caldron. Some refused to eat, others threw up. The sergeant major declared eating statutory duty. Troops were state inventory, human implements that needed regular greasing. Batko stuffed himself with burnt potatoes. For being excessively dutiful, he was sent to wash the caldron. There was no water. The one in the tank was for drinking only. He descended into the ravine, crouched in the fog and started to rub the caldron with rotten leaves and sandy soil.

A sudden bowel movement made him stand up. His stomach rumbled violently and he had to relieve himself on the spot. Sweat broke out on his brow. Mixing with the fog, it created a

sticky-sour film on his face. The fusion of pungent fog, burnt tallow, putrid leaves, and fecal stench reminded him of the Faculty – the Gypsy slums that surrounded the Observatory of the Faculty of Astronomy of Sofia University, hence the Faculty.

He recalled how he used to wander about the Faculty looking for a stray Gypsy girl to hook up with and rid him of his virginity in a stinking alley. It never happened. He remembered feeling sticky and cold, but nevertheless cozy as he wandered down there, in the lower belly of the city – the coziness that the wretched and the miserable feel when huddling up in the acid blanket of the fog.

The streets of Faculty were soulless. He ploughed the jelly-fog with his face. From time to time hazy figures ran across the streets, up-and-down, in-and-out. Rusty hinges squeaked in the background of cacophonous smacking, clapping and wailing of accordions. Stove pipes stuck out of walls spewing smoke that smelled of smoldering dung. The hovels were sunk in the ubiquitous fog like Noah's arks that canned inside the most indecent misery of mankind. Their warped shapes, door and window frames weirdly creaked and glimmered. Their tight interiors were packed with people practicing antediluvian perversions.

By some godless virtue, miasma excited him sexually. Rot could be a potent aphrodisiac. Beastly agitation seized him and he fantasized about his forthcoming encounter with the Gypsy girl. The anticipation of full-bodied lechery gave him masturbatory fever.

The sergeant major found some residual grease on the caldron walls. He made Batko scrape it with his helmet. He followed the order mechanically with his mind spinning crazy like a top. He wandered whether the old Gypsy would keep her word, whether the sergeant major could catch him doing it and he'd be finished. With inflamed nerves, whirling fancy and upset stomach he lay restless in the bunk bed and wasted the two hours of sleep allowed before he went on duty. He squeezed his eyes and soul shut, without even noticing how he reeked of burned tallow.

The time for the night shift came. The sergeant major walked him to his position. He ordered him to stay on duty with a knife clenched between his teeth, so that he'd be a "scary sight" that would keep the enemy at bay. He was left alone and started his round. He walked quietly, counting his steps so as not to think of anything else.

His watch showed one in the morning. He was standing at the fixed spot, knife in teeth. He heard steps. People stole along the bog, nearing him. Suddenly two emaciated figures slipped

out of the gut of darkness and gaped at him in utter stupefaction. He took the knife out of his mouth and put it in the holster. He ordered the old Gypsy to stand behind the tree and motioned the younger one to approach him.

"Who are you?"

"Altyna," she said and smiled. "And you?"

"Ivanov," he muttered.

Batko approached her, stuck his hand under her shirt, groped her breasts, and rubbed her nipples. With his other hand he unbuttoned his trousers. His member touched her naked belly. He felt goose bumps on his scrotum. With his helmet on, he tried to penetrate her from a standing position.

"Hold it, Ivanov, hold it." She pushed him away. "Don't be ridiculous, lose the helmet! You'll smash my face."

He jumped back and got into a shaft of moonlight, where he stood shamefully illuminated. Her eyes locked on his groin and she exclaimed with devastating honesty.

"What a shrimp!"

The word -- delivered with a distinct Gypsy accent -- cut him to the quick and he wished his entire being would shrink to a null, dematerialize on the spot, but instinct stiffened his virility and he stomached the insult.

Altyna looked around and spotted a proper place in the ravine. She lay flat on her back and pulled her skirt up, leaving her naked legs ajar, letting loose her dark Gypsy vehemence. With his eyes locked on her gloomy genitalia, he grew feverish and started shivering uncontrollably. His legs were failing him. He ejaculated prematurely in the air and collapsed in a paroxysm on his knees with his pants down. Completely deaf, as if drifting in the vacuum, he crawled sluggishly over her. She tossed her head backwards and covered her face with her kerchief in an effort to ward off his gaze, his breath, his smell.

"You finish quickly Ivanov, OK!"

He shuddered violently and sank inside her like a fugitive in a quagmire. A massive rush of blood to the head flipped his brain. He felt his groins in flames. Then the brain fever passed,

his mind cleared, and the world became perceivable once again. He saw how her hands were trying to remove his helmet.

Suddenly, her kerchief flew off, lifted by a gut-wrenching shriek. A lightning twitch ravaged her face. An infernal wail ripped out of her throat, turning her in a cachinnating Gorgon. The epileptic fit ruled her. He disengaged her body and continued to watch her face as if through a spy hole, cracking his knuckles violently.

Having heard the wails the old Gypsy came at once, hissing like a viper, tearing her hair and lamenting.

"Please God, spare her... don't let her choke on her tongue. Third time this month, for goodness sake! Just let her come to and I'll do her in, the filthy," her mouth jabbered the word, "epileptician that she is!"

He buried the wrong word deep in his brain, as if it ciphered some hideous insinuation.

The epileptic seizure continued with growing intensity while suddenly Altyna's body strained like a bow string to the breaking point, as if her soul had launched itself in some opaque cosmic profundity. Her lips were chapped, mangled and bloody. Unimaginable wretchedness enraptured her face, which now looked like a snapshot of living horror.

"I can handle this..." the old one said, fussing around.

"How?"

"Bloodletting."

"What?"

"Leeches in the nostrils and she'll be up and running like the lusty bitch that she is."

"Leeches!?"

"The bog is full of these creepy little critters. I'll go hunt for some."

Nocturnal blackness imbibed Altyna's warped frame. He felt helplessly alone. At this moment her eyes cracked open and she fixed him with a ruptured gaze. Her eyes were haggard and cavernous, surrounded by yellow circles. She attempted to gather the world that surrounded her in one place, but failed. A thought started to flicker on her ravaged face. She made an effort

to say something in a sentence, but after she realized that he did not understand her, she faintly stretched her hand and tried to take his helmet off. She pulled him gently towards herself, embraced him and kissed him graciously, barely touching him with her bloated lips.

"What was that?" He asked deeply baffled as he was helping her sit up next to him. "A freaking climax, or what?!"

"It must have been a seizure, Ivanov. You saw it, you should know."

"This always happens to you when you..." He spared her the word.

"It happens when it happens."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"No."

"You should remember something, to a certain point..."

"I remember you ... all over me ... and I begin to rise, something lifts me up as high as the seventh heaven ... for five seconds and then I fall..."

"Five?"

"Yes five, Ivanov."

"Why five?"

"I don't know, Ivanov. I realize this after I come to."

"In heaven you say..."

"It is the seventh heaven."

"What's there?"

"Heavenly things, you know."

"What are they like?"

"Horses gallop ... whip me with their tails..."

"And then what?"

"Then I see you and I kiss you."

Altyna leaned on him and stood up. She staggered forward like an ailing shadow and dropped down again. At this moment the old Gypsy rushed in with a bunch of leeches in hand and jumped on Altyna, cursing her. Batko took her by the waist and tamed her. He buckled up, put his helmet on and made ready to leave. He turned back and barked at the old one.

"Don't touch her! It's an order!"

"I'll give her back to you lily-virgin, but you've got to pay a buck."

"Catch!" He tossed a crumpled banknote at her feet and vanished into the inky fog.