



**December 21,  
1963**



Death solves all problems—no man, no problem.  
—Stalin

**T**he story I am about to relate here—to the extent that my dwindling strength and memory allow—began a while back, some twenty years ago. It came to an end last night when I, citizen Lev Kaludov Zhelyazkov, was set free. At the age of thirty-eight, I emerged from the Central Sofia Prison, serving time for murder and robbery. I had been thrown in during one historical period, and I was released into a completely different one; what separated them was the Day of the Revolution, 9 September 1944.

I stepped out of the jailhouse the way many convicts before me have and many after me will—with hope in heart and plan in mind. I had daydreamt much at first, but then I had started duly mapping out the remainder of my life of freedom, before my pointless sojourn on this dumb earth was over and done with.

A Chinese saying has it that a plan is a dream with a target date. My plan was one of the simplest I have ever heard, and it is safe to say I've heard a good many. According to it, after I came out of the Central Sofia

Slammer, I was to make a stop at the Central Sofia Cemetery. From there, the very same night I was to catch a freight train to the Black Sea port of Varna, hide in the hold of a ship, split for the Torrid Zone, settle down on a tropic isle, and swing in a hammock and bask in the sun for the rest of my life.

I planned to visit two graves at the Orlandovtsi cemetery. The first was that of my late son Leo, whom I was destined never to see; he was born after I was thrown in jail. The other was that of the jeweler whose death I didn't cause but ended up doing time for anyway. In that very grave I was supposed to find buried the key to my half-wasted life.





I didn't witness how the actual 9 September took place. All I know is that it brought about a simple yet significant change in my prison life, which up until then consisted of sporadic mental growth spurts. Suddenly, the Bible was gone forever and was replaced by *Bakalov's Dictionary of Foreign Words*, which provided in 1949 the Marxist-Leninist definitions of those foreign words previously deemed subversive during the monarchic-fascist regime.

Even the blind could see now that the Dictionary had rendered the struggle against non-Slavic words futile, and I resolutely dove into its pages with the same faith and awe I had earlier granted the Holy Scripture. And, thank God, the Dictionary became a window that opened for me a view of the world as elaborated by Darwin, Tsiolkovsky, Makarenko, and other stellar exemplars of the eternal mind, both collective and individual.

At one point after 9 September, I began to acquire knowledge voraciously and perfect myself both spiritu-

ally and physically, inspired by three profound books: *The Gadfly*, *How the Steel Was Tempered*, and *On the Eve*. As part of the process, I started lifting weights and jumping rope. I won second place in the prison's push-ups tournament. I took to reading over and over volume upon volume of fiction and periodicals, with a goal to divine the true nature of things and prepare myself for the moment when I would embrace freedom as an "objective given."

I never prepared for escape and revenge, especially not in my mature period of imprisonment, and unlike my fellow inmates, I read *The Count of Monte Cristo* more as a source of aesthetic pleasure than as a roadmap to life.

I served part of my sentence. My pardon came as a result of my contribution to the implementation of popular education in the daily life of the cooler. More specifically, it came thanks to my propaganda installation "The Communist Time Machine." I put it together with my bare hands, based on my own free will and conceptual design. But it cost me a great deal of effort to find and provide all kinds of badges, painted cast-iron symbols, anthracite lumps, turbine countershafts, flywheels, and other ideologically charged machine parts.

They declared me reformed and let me go. But this inner reform wrecked my nerves. I could build a tower with all the petitions I wrote to all sorts of cultural and industrial institutions, requesting that they provide me with hard evidence of the Communist Time Machine as a topic of meditation capable of rehabilitating the law-

breaking citizens. I got the idea for such a propaganda exhibit somewhat unwittingly. It sprang out of me, so to speak, and probably because of that earned me material benefits and, ultimately, freedom.



The wall-mounted Wired Radio Outlet at the Central Sofia Joint was feeding songs for the masses through the cool cells. Alexander Stepanovich Popov's invention interrupted "The Triumph of Will and Mortar" in order to broadcast the news headlines, after which "Exact Time" announced the hour. It was 17:00.

I finished my one hundred push ups—an ultimate act of survival in the cell. I shaved as usual, eyes closed. I put on the suit in which they had brought me here years ago. It was an old, stately gabardine, black as a raven's wing, robust in the shoulders and worn glossy in the elbows, "theatrically flamboyant," as the district attorney put it during the trial. I was caught at the crime scene wearing that very garment. I hadn't put it on for twenty years. It definitely looked better on me now because I had grown bigger and I could fill it up nicely. I had bought it specifically for the robbery, as a tool, intentionally big and wide, but more on that in due course.

I shot a glance at the darkened sky beyond the bars, and a fleeting smile must have flickered across my face

because I said to myself, “You look at the sky, and it looks back at you with a barred eye.”

I took away with me from the cell three things—her letter regarding the death of my son, Leo, the glass eye of my late mentor and cellmate Van Voorst the Eye, and a postcard he owned, which displayed the most sinister and absolutely hypnotic image I’ve ever seen—a chalk-pale, diabolically rapacious female chewing up a male who’d fallen prey to her, turning his flesh into bloody pulp. I removed the postcard from the wall where it had been hanging for many years, since long before I moved into the cell.

From underneath my mattress, I pulled out an envelope wrapped in disintegrating cellophane, and from the envelope I removed a faded yellowish paper filled with writing—her letter in question, rendered in typically girlish hand. I put the postcard and the letter back in the envelope, and I inserted it in the inner pocket of my gabardine jacket. I straightened out the bed’s blanket, picked up the *Dictionary of Foreign Words in Bulgarian*, put its pages in order, grasped it tightly since it was falling apart, and stood waiting by the door to be escorted out to freedom.

The main office of the cooler had a small flimsy “customer” window. There I handed over the *Dictionary*, almost completely loose, and I retrieved the personal belongings that had been taken away from me when I arrived—a large brass key from the apartment with the geranium, in which she and I had lived for a short while;

an old, pre-revolutionary banknote; an indelible pencil; and a chunk of natural unadulterated *zift*.

Next to the window stood a beat-up wicker basket full of rejected personal belongings—handkerchiefs, old coins, keys, worn pocket mirrors, pens, a toupee, garters, mustache dye, and other such material refuse. I tossed my now-useless key and the tsarist money into the basket, but I decided to keep the indelible pencil and slid it into the small pocket of my gabardine. Who knew? Maybe I'd need it both to write with and to use as medicine. They had found the pencil on me at the time of the arrest. Back then, a wart had developed on my little toe. It bothered me when I walked, which wasn't going to help any in the robbery, so I started burning the wart using the indelible pencil moistened with spit, just like a medically savvy barber had instructed me.

I bit at the *zift* and pocketed the rest. I started rolling the *zift* inside my mouth so it would soften. It released its flavor, which slithered through my cranial cavities.

“The end starts at the very beginning.” I had hand-picked and memorized this maxim so that I could utter it as I stepped over the cooler's threshold. I wanted to give the moment its due, as it could turn out to be overwhelming, and one might find a bit of wisdom handy in order to stomach it. I couldn't allow this long-cherished moment to simply go by just like that—one foot after the other, and you're out. Walking out, stepping over the

threshold, is a special event, like passing under the rainbow and morphing into a completely different person.

Unfortunately, due to some apparent absurdity, at the gate I bumped into the shitty face of a particularly vile warden whom we called the Mole-Cricket. I couldn't help walking past him without smacking him in the mug with the phlegmy curse that had been building up my throat all these years. I expressed myself and left relieved. As for the maxim—I remembered about it only now.

Exact Time announced the hour on the Wired Radio Outlet—it was already 17:30.