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Translator's Introduction

"Humor is the last reality of optimism," writes Iskander. I would disagree. Humor is the frontline of hope. Humor is the backbone of resilience. In the fight between good and evil, humor favors the former. Humor is, in fact, incomprehensible to the latter. "Power, violence, authority never speak the language of laughter," wrote Bakhtin.[1] Tyranny does not understand humor. Tyranny fears humor, for humor is its undoing.

Fazil Iskander understood this acutely. Born in 1929, Iskander witnessed it all: the terror of the Stalin years, the illusory promise of the Khrushchev Thaw, the aimlessness of the Brezhnev era, the accelerated liberalization of Gorbachev's perestroika, the creeping oligarchy of Yeltsin's '90s, and, finally, the consolidated kleptocracy of the 2000s and 2010s. For several decades, Iskander's works held up a mirror to each era's surreal shortcomings and, by reflecting them, rendered them powerless. By reflecting them, Iskander also underscored the idiosyncratic historical qualities that some peoples of the Soviet Union were unable to escape.

Today is March 16, 2022. I write this as Russian bombs sow death in Ukrainian cities. The fields, woods, and urban jungles of Ukraine are serving as a battleground for a fight between a people defending a hard-won democracy and a people held in the thrall of an authoritarian regime unleashing the genocidal spasms of its late-stage senility. Russia's looming military defeat and the obstinate resilience of the Ukrainian people should not have come as a surprise. Had the West better grasped the mindsets of the different peoples occupying post-Soviet space, perhaps it would not have. This translation of a work by one of the most beloved late Soviet writers should help bridge that gap.

To the astute onlooker, this war should have revealed a key difference between Kremlin-Mordor's attacking horde and the Ukrainians, ordinary and extraordinary, standing sentinel on democracy's border. That key difference is a sense of humor. From grandmothers, standing on the side of the road

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1 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1990), 104.

laughing at Russian orcs driving by in their tanks, to Ukrainian television anchors, who spent the first week of the war cracking wise on air in parking garages and basements. Their levity in the face of an adversary with genocidal objectives has been unfailing. And it has revealed that the Russian horde's attempt to conquer the unconquerable is laughable. It is savage, barbaric, inhuman, genocidal, helpless, borne of a single insignificant man's psychotic envy—envy of Ukraine's freedom, envy of Ukraine's quality of life, envy of Ukraine's confidence. But it is always laughable, because it has always been doomed to failure.

As Iskander's works show, all such attempts ultimately are.

As the October Revolution—and the endemic absurdity of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia—was fated to be. And nobody simultaneously captured, illuminated, subverted, and ultimately neutered this absurdity better than Fazil Iskander. The seemingly effortless wit and humor of his oeuvre, which spanned over forty years, proved so potent a remedy to the absurd tyranny of Soviet and post-Soviet times that he often had to publish his books in the United States first prior to re-importing them to the USSR.

It is a sadly appropriate coincidence that this translation of Iskander's *Man and His Surroundings* should come out after the war. "The function of laughter is to reveal, uncover the truth, untether reality from the cover of etiquette, ceremonialism, artificial inequality."[2] Iskander's pathos-less wit and casual irony strip away the near-endless layers of falsehood that have clouded both Soviet and post-Soviet Russian realities. This book reveals the cultural pathologies that have taken such powerful root over the centuries, from the birth of imperial Russia through the darkness of the Soviet Union to the genocidal senility of post-Yeltsin Russia. These are pathologies in which lie the causes of many of the woes plaguing modern Russia—and those in whose lives modern Russian has interfered, often lethally. Iskander's light-handed humor lays bare the foundation of modern Russia's criminality—and its impending unraveling.

As Ukraine, even twenty-one days into this war, maintains its sense of humor, waves of actors, satirists, and stand-up comedians are fleeing Russia, passports in hand. The last sources of laughter are quitting the country while Roskomnadzor cleans up the remaining vestiges of liberal-adjacent

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2 Dmitry Likhachev, *Historical Poetics of Russian Literature* (St. Petersburg: Aleteya, 1977), 350.

thought in Russia's information space. In this war, it is not difficult to figure out which—invader or defender—is immune to humor. No, not immune—*terrified*. Just as the Soviet authorities were always terrified of Iskander and the humor that he wielded, humor that so effectively revealed the regime's emptiness when little else could.

It is my hope that this translation endows English-speaking audiences with a little more understanding of the worldviews, mindsets, tendencies, and psycho-cultural realities of some of the peoples who occupied Soviet territories and who now occupy post-Soviet territories. It is my hope that readers of this book will understand that there is nothing surprising about the current war or about what is currently happening in Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus. It is my hope that readers will realize that this war was preventable, had the West acted a little differently, a little more decisively. It is my fervent hope that readers will value the role that humor must play in a thriving democracy.

Humor is not the last reality of optimism. But it can be the last thing that authoritarianism ever hears.

May laughter ring throughout the cities of Russia—however little territory it occupies—soon.

— Alexander Rojavin

Instead of a Foreword

Man and His Surroundings is my last work. Every writer thinks his last work is his best. That makes sense. He wouldn't write it otherwise. Gyrating on a dialectical spiral, he believes that he's finally gotten his hands on the juiciest cluster of grapes and has managed to squeeze it out in its entirety onto the manuscript. Naturally, his own intoxication doesn't affect anything, and time alone will tell how successful the book is.

The chapter on Lenin seems to be seminal for the whole book. Everything that takes place in the subsequent chapters up through the semi-disintegration of our government is a natural function of the triumph of Leninism.

I knew a madman once who dedicated his whole life to Lenin and sometimes posed as him. That's what helped me engage Lenin in what was a fairly tiring dialogue and what ultimately allowed me to write this chapter.

I rewrote it for the final time right before the August Putsch. I was still in bed when my wife told me about what had happened. I didn't get up. My first thought was: it's over, no one will publish it now. I'll have to publish it in another country, like *Sandro*, if the danger won't be too great.

Still in bed, but listening to the door's slightest movements, I thought it unlikely that a string of high-profile arrests would follow. But I was sure there would likely be a great famine.

Still in bed, I remembered my madman and was surprised that after reinventing himself as Lenin, he said several times during our last conversation that a coup was in the works and transparently hinted at how analogous his own role would be to his role in 1917.

That's when the phone rang, and I was forced to get up. This was all happening at my summer home. It was my nephew calling. He was passing through Moscow and had stopped at my apartment. He said that some man had just come by asking for me. Judging by the man's description, I instantly

figured out who he was talking about. It was an extraordinary coincidence. Of all my noble acquaintances, he was the one we always suspected the most of working for them. What those people wanted from us is unclear. Since then, he himself disappeared without a trace.

So, let's get back to the hero of my tale. Judging by how the failed revolt was organized, it seemed entirely plausible that he really *was* in charge of it. I won't go over the crude military errors that even I noticed for reasons that the reader can figure out independently. Especially since he's also dropped off the face of the earth. I mean my literary hero, not the reader, of course. Though these days, anything is possible.

It's possible that he's gone deep underground and is planning a new revolt. Let's hope that it will be equally "successful." At any rate, we must remain vigilant, and the publisher should quickly set about publishing this book.

But if everything turns out *very* poorly, then I'll take advantage of my old relationship with my tale's hero, and I'll try to shield myself and the publisher. I'll assure him that he was called a madman exclusively for censorship reasons, and as for Lenin's ideas—well, I never disfigured them. For some reason, I first wrote "you can't disfigure them." A Freudian slip, and one that rhymes with my name. What could that mean? No, he won't believe me. That's for sure.

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Lenin at the Amra

Humor is the last reality of optimism. So, let's take advantage of this (I almost wrote "sad") reality.

They said that Lenin had showed up in town. They said that he rode around on a bike and that he didn't preach too openly, but that he didn't shy away from the near future's impending revolt. They said that he did so at the Amra, the roofless top floor of a restaurant where many locals and out-of-towners eat ice cream and drink coffee—and maybe even something stronger.

Let me specify right away that I'm talking about the seaside restaurant Amra that's on the ancient wharf in the town called Mukhus. If someone has in mind some other restaurant called "Amra" in some other town, even if its name sounds similar to my Mukhus, they should abstain from any protestations. "That's not how they serve food in our Amra." "Our barista's nose is completely different." "The author's got it all wrong, and the architecture's wrong too." I will repeat myself right now: I am talking about my Amra in my Mukhus. Everything in it looks exactly as I say, and the barista's nose looks exactly like I say it does, if I even choose to say anything about it at all.

So. They said that Lenin had showed up in town. Obviously, I'm talking about the crazy person that sometimes masqueraded as Lenin and sometimes didn't. Though they said that he wasn't posing as Lenin himself, but as the foremost expert on Lenin's biography, and that he could answer any question on the subject.

Though he was born in Mukhus and his poor mother is still alive, he spent his entire adult life working in Moscow. He taught Marxism in one of Moscow's universities and spent many years writing a book in which he reconstructed Lenin's life not just by the day, but sometimes by the hour.

He made many desperate attempts to publish it. First under Khrushchev, then under Brezhnev. But neither the Khrushchev nor the Brezhnev governments wanted anything to do with such a detailed biography of Lenin. According to hearsay, that's when he went right off the deep end.

As odd as it may seem, almost everything that people would say about him afterwards proved correct. But does anybody truly understand the secrets of the human psyche? Nobody knows when exactly he went off the deep end: was it when his thirty years of work were rejected by every single publisher he contacted, or was it when he began the work in the first place?

You know, could it have been his own name that inspired him to take up this pursuit?

The thing is that his name was, unfortunately, Stepan Timofeyevich, just like the famous Volga bandit, Stepan Razin, whom our historians have morphed into a nonconformist revolutionary.[1]

Though, all things considered, long before the Bolsheviks, people had already made him their idol, writing legends and songs in his honor. Not a single people in history has failed to elegize its outlaws, but every people has done so differently.

The famous song on Stepan Razin praises the fact that he threw his gorgeous Persian girl overboard as a noble deed. Why? Because he heard his crew murmuring behind his back: "Did he just replace us with some broad?" Of course, the problem isn't that he exchanged his cutthroats for a broad, but that he has a beautiful Persian girl and they don't. How unjust.

Our people are willing to commit the most heinous crime so long as they're assured that they'll be equal in their banditry. They understand and accept solidarity and equality before banditry. But they don't understand, nor do they accept equality before the law. They've never had a law like that, and what they did have that tried to pass itself off as such a law was always a boldfaced lie. A yearning for equality resulted in the fleeting equality of banditry.

Banditry turns into a moment of truth. Dreams of equality before banditry enthrall them so much that not only do they not pity their victims,

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1 Stepan Razin (or Stenka Razin) was a seventeenth-century Cossack leader who led an uprising against the nobility in 1670–1671. He was mythologized in multiple Russian and Soviet works of art, including poems, songs, and one of the very first Russian narrative films (1908). Aside from leading an uprising, he is most famous in popular culture for throwing a captive princess overboard into the Volga River.

they're confident ahead of time about their guilt, if only because the poor victims are soulless in their eyes, like swine, and consequently they can be cut down like swine.

Equality before banditry doesn't mean that everyone will profit the same. Everyone has an equal opportunity before banditry, but it's worth saying that a lot hinges on one's agility, cunning, ruthlessness, and luck.

Banditry, as paradoxical as it may seem, sates one's thirst for seeing enterprise be justly rewarded. In places where times of peace don't see enterprise naturally rewarded—in other words, an absence of bourgeois law—this thirst is sated by banditry and the moment in which banditry occurs.

As an ideal folk hero, Stepan Razin surmises the fierce might of his companions' displeasure just in time. He was the one to ignore the rules of the game—not them. If it were a barrel of gold next to him instead of a beautiful Persian girl, he'd pour it out to his companions, and everything would be fine. But you can't divide a Persian princess like that. So what's left?

Overboard she goes.

Right into the inbound wave.

The grim splendor of equal distribution. If nobody gets any, that means everybody gets none. The line "right into the inbound wave" is surprising in its brilliant simplicity. The wave, bounding up to the ship, does so like a faithful dog bounding to its master. Nature itself approves of such a just act. Harmony is restored. And nature's approval belies the secret will of God. It's as if he observes everything from above and smiles: "You're on the right path, comrades. You're doing good."

What do you call an eastern overlord that orders silver coins to be thrown into the crowd when he stands before his people? What do you call a merchant who rolls out a barrel of wine for his employees? What do you call a celebratory feast in honor of a minister's years of service? And what do you call the outbreak of collectivization, and what do you call 1937? These are all varied attempts to unite us and restore our unity through our common brigandish proto-memories. But let's not get ahead of ourselves and instead return to my countryman, who once reached the conclusion that he was Lenin.

There's a half-philosopher, half-mystic that lives in Mukhus (you can find anything in Mukhus), who explains what happened as follows. He says that our countryman, having poured his soul into Lenin's biography, literally restored Lenin's spirit, and that this grateful spirit evidently preferred the

mortal coil of our hard-working kinsman to all other mortal coils. (Why the spirit didn't head for the Mausoleum will become clear later, if I manage to guide this story to its end.)

It's odd that Lenin never really concerned me as a character during my life as a writer. Stalin interested and drew me to him. I had the feeling that in him lay the secret of what it was to be a great villain. But I passed by Lenin without a second glance. "So he might be a fanatic, he might be a rationalist, so what?" I thought. "There's no deep, secret personality to uncover."

I was in America in a Russian summer school in Vermont. Together with my wife and kid, I lived in that school for a month and a half, occasionally giving lectures to the students studying Russian literature, but more often roaming around its verdant, hilly surroundings.

There was an old man there who was ninety-plus years old who happened to be the school's founder. His last name was Pervushin. He came to my lectures, and not only mine—a few Muscovite writers had come there with me. Old man Pervushin listened to us with a spry interest that was surprising for his age and even asked us questions fairly often.

Turned out that he was related to Lenin. In fact, he was so closely related, or at least their families were, that with the help of Lenin's brother Dmitry Ulyanov, he managed to forge Lenin's signature on a document ostensibly allowing him to go to some made-up conference and flee Russia.

This was obviously when Lenin was still alive. I took note of a particular detail. Old man Pervushin said that at the time, Ulyanov's last name alone was enough for the Cheka.[2] Apparently, right after the revolution, Lenin hadn't yet begun signing his name like we're used to seeing in his facsimile—Ulyanov-Lenin. He would, by quite understandable habit, sign his name as he always had since his youth.

Having explained whom he has to thank for fleeing the country, the old man laughed a quiet, cooing laugh. His laugh could be interpreted like this: "I realized that it's not worth getting too close to history, and that's why I'm still alive. And where are those that decided to get too intimate with it? Exactly!"

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2 The acronym ChK (ЧК in Russian) stands for Emergency Committee. Headed by "Iron" Felix Dzerzhinsky, it was the predecessor to the NKVD, which preceded the KGB, which preceded the FSB.

It was very amiable laughter. Sadly, I didn't ask the old man anything else about his famous relative. I hadn't even asked him about this. He just told us on his own. I regret it, but alas, it's too late now.

Having come back to Moscow and plunged into our restless, harried, hysterical life that so resembles pre-October Russia, I finally decided to read Lenin's works that I hadn't touched since my student days.

I stubbornly read him for a solid month. It wasn't easy reading, in the sense that it was difficult trying to get over how dull it was. He writes in endless circles, occasionally performing rhetorical zigzags that would make a professional ice skater blush, but he does it all monotonously, all on one, unchanging plane.

But what's self-evident to an ice skater isn't evident to a thinker. A thinker is intriguing because we see him go deeper and deeper, step by step in his search for the truth. We're interested in this deepening path, because it is art, because he himself has no idea where his next step will take him. We see how he feels around for firm ground, finds it, and moves on.

Lenin knows ahead of time that there's nowhere deeper to go and no reason to do so. He's smart, of course, but in a limited sense. Lenin is consistently sensible within the chaos of the general idea. What's fascinating is the contradiction between the energy of his mind and the banality of his thought. Typically, great thinkers astound us with a combination of mental energy and grand ideas. This seems natural. It's the mental energy that allows the idea to soar to unimaginable heights.

But maybe there are exceptions? This question is interesting when divorced from Lenin. Could you imagine a singer of Chaliapin's[3] caliber hear the Marseillaise, fall in love with it, and perform nothing else for the rest of his life, even if he sang thousands of variations?

Can you imagine a writer of Lev Tolstoy's caliber spend his life doing low-quality journalism and never writing a single short story worthy of his innate talent just because he happened to be poor or burdened with a large family?

It's practically impossible to imagine this. It would seem that a person's thoughts about another person correspond to his innate ability to understand people. Ethical hearing is like musical hearing—you can hone it slightly, but you're still stuck with what you're born.

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3 Fyodor Chaliapin (1873–1938) was a world-famous Russian opera singer.

It would be inaccurate to say that Lenin's massive revolutionary undertaking distracted him and limited his comprehension of his fellow man. On the contrary, his massive revolutionary work was the result of his limited comprehension of human nature. It released in his soul the dreadful and joyful energy of destruction.

Let's imagine a card player who's developed a credible theory on how to win. But this theory requires big games and big money that he doesn't have. Let's imagine that he reveals this theory to a very wealthy person who agrees to let him play using his money, on some conditions.

And he sits down to play. But it turns out that the theory is wrong. And yet he plays and plays and eventually loses everything. Why didn't he stop after sensing that the theory was wrong? Because he was in the heat of the moment, and, more importantly, because he wasn't losing his own money.

Our great revolutionary is the same. He's playing with somebody else's money. A joke concerning Wilhelm's money isn't appropriate here. He's playing with millions of lives. If he had had the thought beforehand that he might lose, that hordes of people might die for nothing, he wouldn't have begun his revolution. But why doesn't this thought pay him a visit? Because of his limited comprehension of human nature. But where is this limited comprehension of human nature from? If we boil his own nature down to its very essence, we'll be left with this—moral stupidity.

Given his rage and the frightful temperament with which he constantly hammers away at the old morality, dreaming of creating a new socialist human, did he really fail to understand that even if it were possible to create a new morality, more perfect than the old one, it would be the fruit of *millennia* of work? And how can you begin a new life with the destruction of the old morality that was also forged over millennia? It's no different from planting the shoot of a breadfruit tree and immediately burning the nearby, albeit not yet entirely mature, wheat field.

There is no wisdom in Lenin's writings. He's always rushing, always biased. Apparently, to be wise, you have to think a lot, but lazily. Only he who thinks but forgets what he thinks about can get his thoughts somewhere significant. In order to think, you have to remove yourself from life. The philosopher's strength is the ability to remove himself from life while hanging on to his memories of it.

I'll take it on myself to dispute Marx's famous aphorism: up to this point, philosophers have explained the world, but the trick is to change it. As soon as a philosopher begins changing life, he loses the ability to judge

it impartially because he becomes a part of life's stream. And the more he changes the stream's direction after entering its flow, the more misguided are his judgments about what is happening. And now, the only person who can properly evaluate what's going on in the world, which our philosopher is changing and splashing about in, is another philosopher who's sitting on the beach, observing what's going on.

But if, after seeing his colleague splashing around, he dives in after him to explain his errors, everything he tells him will be inaccurate, because in entering the stream himself, he has once again altered its properties.

Which is how poor Martov[4] would dive into the stream that Lenin was splashing around in, and then get out and yell at him about his errors from the beach, but to no avail—they were already destined never to understand each other. Meanwhile, Lenin was paddling aimlessly inside a whirlpool, interpreting each lap around the watery cyclone as a new dialectical spiral, right up to the point when he convulsively choked to death.

Put short, reading Lenin brought up a lot of bewildered questions. Oh, and I also noticed his powerful human traits. For example, disciplined self-control, at least in his writings. The more tragic the situation was, the more furiously and unswervingly he would dictate his will. No panic, no confusion.

I wrote and printed an essay in which I expressed serious doubts about his ideas and train of thought. I mention this because it is relevant to what I'm going to tell.

So, Lenin showed up in Mukhus. I was standing with my cousin Kemal, a former military pilot and current senior citizen, on a neat, little street, planted all over with old sycamores. I was asking him about this man. My cousin would reluctantly respond. He clearly didn't approve of my curiosity.

"An insolent son of a bitch," he called him.

"Why?" I asked.

"He got groceries at the same veterans' store we did," my cousin said. "But then it turned out that he was never in the war . . . A strange guy . . . Oh, here he is!"

My cousin nodded in the direction of a man that appeared out from behind the corner on a bicycle. I instantly recognized him, and he instantly recognized me.

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4 Julius Martov (1873–1923), born Tsederbaum, was a politician and leader of the Mensheviks. He was also a close friend of Lenin.

"What a pair of wonder-brothers I see!" he shouted out and then added after raising his hand: "I read your article! I fundamentally disagree! We'll duke it out on the idiot box!"

With that, he caught the wiggling handlebars and zoomed by us. He was wearing a short-sleeved, blue-and-white sailor's shirt that showed off surprisingly strong, viselike arms. He had a familiar, very tanned, thickset face with bright eyes and a large forehead with a hairline that wasn't even remotely receding. I knew him well, of course, but I'd just forgotten about him. Some fifteen years ago in Moscow, he'd come to me with some verse he had written. He called me by phone, said that he was my countryman, and asked me to read his poetry.

When I answered the doorbell, a heavyset, bright-eyed man with a large forehead stood in the door, and he looked absolutely nothing like Lenin. Head slightly inclined, he examined me and curtly stated his impressions:

"You look like him. Definitely. Though not really. Slightly worse for the wear."

"Who do I look like?" I asked, wary.

"Like your pilot cousin!" he joyfully exclaimed, lurched towards me, hugged me, and even managed to land a kiss on my cheek. Then, as if having proven our kinship, he quickly undressed and began telling me about himself, all the while glancing in the mirror and combing his curly, light brown hair.

This is how you behave with a very old friend in a very familiar home. Right, I forgot to add that, before this, he handed me a red folder full of his verse with a sense of relief. Like an idiot, I took it and became a little stricter, as if in light of the responsibility he had just heaved upon me. I decided to be curter with him and at least do away with the familial ardor.

He was infinitely friendly. He would laugh at the drop of a hat. He'd jump up, sit back down, joke around. Then I read his verse while he strolled next to the bookshelves, greeting some books like old friends, as if unobtrusively demonstrating his class.

His verse turned out to be fairly grammatical and fairly insipid. The main theme was the Revolution. For the most part they were poems about Lenin. I gave him a pretty sour review, but to make the pill sweeter to swallow, I told him to bring me some more. He wasn't at all offended by my response, and I liked that.

Then he told me that he was planning to publish his life's work—the Leniniana. This didn't surprise me at all. Just about every single Marxism

teacher dreams of writing a book on Marx or Lenin. Or on Engels at the very least.

However, I stopped that train of thought right in its tracks, getting the sense that this person had far too much energy. We'd spend more than enough time just talking about the innocent eccentricities of our mutual acquaintances, even if those eccentricities sometimes turned into inexplicable oddities. That said, he did make one more attempt to break through and cried out:

"When Lenin's one hundred and twenty-seven love letters to Ines Armand are published, the world will know that this fiery revolutionary could love like no one else!"

"Why didn't he marry her, then?" I inquired, but letting him know with my tone that I didn't want a novel in response. And he understood that.

"He couldn't leave Nadezhda Konstantinovna!" came the heated response. "She had Graves' Disease, and he couldn't leave a sick wife! The man's nobility is incredible. The world has to know!"

Both the world and I already knew a little something about the man's nobility, but I kept quiet. In short, I gave him a sour response to his verse and told him that he should show me something else. He visited me several times over the course of two years. The poems changed, but the subject matter narrowed and, as I now understand, menacingly concentrated on Lenin. They didn't really differ from the usual graphomaniacal poems about Lenin. Everyone wrote about how Lenin was metaphorically alive. But my countryman focused on the idea of the people somehow, miraculously meeting Lenin anew: "Lenin is Coming," "Lenin is Among Us," "Lenin Will Be Here Soon," and the like. Again, these motifs weren't new, but my kinsman was clearly overdoing it.

"I'm tired of trying to get the Leniniana published," he said to me once, winking at me meaningfully. "I'm prepared to split the royalties with whoever manages to push my book through. Tit for tat, sound good?"

"No," I said. "That won't work for me."

"Does tit for tat not suit you?" he sounded surprised and said: "Ok, how about this: one third of royalties go to me, one third goes to you, and one third to the publisher's director?"

"Do you really not see the monstrous contradiction here?" I said, surgically getting angry. "You live in Lenin's kingdom, you glorify Lenin with your book, but nobody wants to publish it? What do you call that in your dialectic: the negation of a negative?"

"There's no contradiction!" he exclaimed. "Stalin organized a quiet, counterrevolutionary coup! We have to launch a new attack. My Leniniana is the algebra of revolution—that's why they don't want to publish it."

I kept silent. Who the hell was this guy! Could he have been . . . one of them? After all, why couldn't they use oddballs like him? That had already happened to me. After my uncensored *Sandro* came out in America, I waited for something bad to happen. And suddenly an old acquaintance of mine showed up, and after a short conversation that didn't obligate anyone to do anything, he led me out to my own balcony, as if wary of listening devices in the room, and told me that a friend of his just came back from Europe, a dependable friend, and that I could send a manuscript that wouldn't make it past the censorship with him to the West.

"There's no need," I told him coldly.

I had the feeling that he sighed with relief: he both fulfilled his assignment and didn't actually betray anyone. We went back inside.

"What's this for?" he nodded towards the desk where there lay an Abkhazian shepherd's knife next to my typewriter, solemnly guarding that minstrel of the shepherd's way of life.

"That's in case anyone tries anything funny," I said very clearly so that the people who worked where he came from could hear me too. He left quickly and never came back. At the time, I felt like I played that round well and won. I still feel like that, but I can never be completely sure that he really came from where I think he did. At any rate, those were our realities back then.

One way or another, I'd had enough of my countryman, and I decided to get rid of him by pretending to help. I decided to write a recommendatory note to the editors of a relatively liberal journal where I'd been published and where they knew me well. Let *them* deal with writers like this, they actually get paid for it.

I felt that I had written a cleverly disguised, ironic note, recommending an aspiring poet and a well-known teacher of Marxism. (Well known to whom? Lenin would have put an ironic "sic!" here.) Noting the aspiring poet's literary naiveté on one hand, I complimented his stubborn efforts to laud the purity of revolutionary ideals.

I was pleased. I felt that the note would slip past the censors. I was sure that my friends over at the journal would instantly understand that it was a joke. And he wouldn't. I gave him the note and relaxed in the quiet and joyful anticipation of our little romance coming to an end.