

«Mouse»

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PROLOGUE

Dmitry Danilovich knew exactly when his life had gone wrong. He remembered that day as distinctly as if it had been yesterday, not forty years ago. He remembered the suffocating heat within the Politburo meeting room. He remembered the annoying chirping of sparrows outside the window. And he remembered the drop of saliva frozen in the corner of Leonid Brezhnev's mouth.

The General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, member of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Marshal, Hero of Socialist Labour and four times Hero of the Soviet Union was asleep. And he had been asleep for a long time: he said a couple incomprehensible sentences right at the beginning of the meeting, cleared his throat, took a pause, chewed a few more words, paused again and... fell asleep. He had been asleep for forty minutes, and Mitya - it would not have occurred to anyone to call Dmitry Danilovich by patronymic at that time - was ready to swear that he had heard snoring. But he could not say for certain whether it was Brezhnev's snoring or that of some other member of the Politburo who had dozed off that hot afternoon.

Mitya stared, mesmerised, at the saliva of the marshal and four-time Hero of the Soviet Union. It made him furious. He imagined himself jumping up from his seat, leaping across the room, jumping onto the table, running across it, knocking over cups and ashtrays, running to the chair where Brezhnev was sprawled out, grabbing him by the chest and shaking him. Waking him up! Get up, Leonid Ilyich, don't embarrass yourself! You're the leader of a great country, how dare you!

But of course Mitya did none of this. Along with the others, he continued to wait in silence for Brezhnev to wake up.

Looking back on the years that have passed, Dmitry Danilovich suddenly realised that if he had decided to take a desperate step back then, his whole life would have turned out very differently. Maybe not as successful, but definitely different. And not just his, but the lives of hundreds of millions, perhaps billions of people... But it was too late to think about that now. It was time to draw a line under life.

Newspapers rustled in the stuffy conference room. From time to time someone sitting at the long table would say something in a low voice to his or her neighbour. The country's chief ideologist, the decrepit comrade Suslov, coughed hoarsely. Marshal Ustinov, the Minister of Defence, was smoking his thirteenth cigarette in a row

dissatisfied. He was blowing the smoke through his nose with such force that even Mitya, who was far away, could see the flutter of hair in the marshal's nostrils.

Mitya shifted his gaze and stared again at the drop of Brezhnev's saliva that had so captivated him. Now he was overwhelmed by a sense of bitter disappointment.

He had been waiting for this day. He had a hope in it. This was the day that would turn his fortunes around, for to be invited to a Politburo meeting as an expert was a great honour. To be invited at the age of 25 was an unprecedented honour.

It should be noted, however, that Mitya himself was not surprised by the invitation. After all, he was a genius. He was open and unashamed about it. Why should he have been embarrassed? He entered the institute at the age of 15 and defended his doctorate at 22. He was the smartest man in the Soviet Union and it seemed natural to him that the people who running the country would want to hear his report.

On that fateful day, Mitya was in a hurry. Almost running, gasping for breath, he ran through Alexander Garden, across Red Square, and by 10:02 he was standing at the gatehouse under the vaults of Spassky Gate.

The Politburo met every Thursday at 11:00. This rule was introduced by Vladimir Lenin, and although Ilyich had been in the mausoleum for a long time, his testament was never violated. Although it was not fully observed.

Brezhnev and the nine "elders" who determined the fate of the USSR first met in private - in the famous Nut Room. There they could discuss all issues and make all decisions. There they could afford to argue as equals, away from the eyes of the "younger comrades", to whom they could only present the decisions they had taken, which did not allow for discussion.

Discussions in the Nut Room always took a while, and now that Leonid Ilyich's condition had worsened, the conversation behind closed doors had dragged on. To the meeting room, where the young doctor of science had been waiting for almost two hours, the "elders" came out only at a quarter to two.

Mitya looked at the clock - half past three. It was the same: coughing, rustling, damp stuffiness and silence. Not for nothing did the duty officer at the Spassky Gate chuckle at him: he had arrived at ten in the morning, idiot - meetings, as everyone who worked in the Kremlin knew, never started on time.

Suddenly Brezhnev's body shook a little. The people gathered around the table broke out of their state of waiting and turned towards the Hero of Socialist Labour. The one opened his eyes, looked slowly around the room and said...

Mitya could not understand what Leonid Ilyich had said, but after these words - if they were words at all - the chairs creaked and their legs rattled on the oak floorboards: the members of the Politburo rose from their seats. Mitya jumped up too. He jumped up so sharply that marshal Ustinov looked at him with a raised eyebrow, and comrade Suslov turned in his direction and turned up his sharp nose.

The double doors leading into the anteroom swung open, and all the members proceeded. A middle-aged man, a desk officer, appeared in the doorway and stared at Mitya, signaling that the meeting was over and it was time for the tongue and caviar sandwiches. Mitya obediently left the room. In the anteroom, scientists and generals,

factory managers and union leaders crowded around the table. Normally, experts were allowed only here - a small room with a round table, where visitors waited for a chance to see the members of the Politburo and the First Secretaries of the Central Committee as they left the meeting hall. To introduce oneself, to give a folder and to hope that someday they would be remembered and called. It was an extraordinary honour for Mitya to enter the meeting room. But now he had no idea what it was for.

The conversation buzzed around Mitya like a swarm of bees. Mitya sighed and reached out to take some cracker ring from the crystal plate.

- Comrade Mikhailin?

Mitya turned his head slowly. An inconspicuous man of indeterminate age was speaking to him. A familiar face, but he couldn't remember his name or position... Arkady Borisovich? The assistant's assistant?

- Mitya? - The man smiled. - Your name is Mitya, isn't it?

Mitya gave his face the most polite expression possible and answered quietly:

- Yes, Arkady Borisovich, Mitya. Mitya Mikhailin.

There was a phone on the table in front of Dmitry Danilovich. The "voice recorder" application was turned on. It had been recording silence for the last five minutes. Dmitry Danilovich had been completely lost in his own thoughts.

So why did he answer then? It's understandable why. He wanted a career, money, fame, recognition. At the age of 25, these are perfectly reasonable desires...

Dmitry Danilovich coughed and continued his story.

A man with an inconspicuous position, as an experienced colleague had once explained to Mitya, had an incredible amount of power. Living in the shadow of the Kremlin throne, Arkady Borisovich was a true king of underhanded intrigues. One word from him, at the right moment, could ruin a career, or on the contrary, it could determine a person's most successful life.

Arkady Borisovich stared intently at Mitya. He seemed to be weighing the pros and cons that only he knew and finally came to a final decision.

- Mitya, I hope you have no plans for Saturday? I'd like to talk to you in person. Unable to believe his own luck, Mitya could only nod his head in silence, and Arkady Borisovich went on:

- "I invite you to my dacha. Please be home by six in the evening, and I'll send a car for you.

Mitya nodded, thanked him, wanted to shake his hand, but decided that if Arkady Borisovich wanted to shake his hand, he would have suggest it himself.

That was the end of their first conversation.

Expectations and possible prospects of Saturday's trip captured Mitya. He didn't notice how the next hour flew by, didn't remember if he had talked to anyone, and didn't even remember how he had handed over the folder with the report to the desk officer. What

he did remember was that he never got managed to present the report. That and the drop of saliva.

From the Kremlin, Mitya ran to the metro, got to his apartment in Sokolniki, and began to wait. For the next two days, he did not get any work done. He couldn't even make himself read books, he just paced from one corner of his work room to another, waiting for the moment of the meeting.

On Saturday, at exactly 6:00 p.m., a black "Volga" drove into the courtyard of his house. The driver did not have to go up to the third floor or even honk - Mitya was ready. He had been sitting at the window for half a day, dressed and even with shoes on.

The taciturn but particularly tactful driver - "Good evening, Dmitry Danilovich" - drove him out of the town, to an old dacha in Peredelkino, and escorted the nervous Mitya deep into the pine-covered plot. There Arkady Borisovich was waiting for him in a small arbour.

That evening he was relaxed, his shirt was unbuttoned by three buttons. Mitya sat down in the wicker chair and waited in silence for Arkady Borisovich to start a conversation. The master of the house was reading a paper, holding it in his slightly bent hand.

The sweet aroma of pilaf came from the open window of the kitchen of the large house that stood almost in the middle of the plot. Arkady Borisovich was known for his lunches and dinners, where the most important issues in the life of the USSR were decided. Ministers were appointed and dismissed, new stars were born in the diplomatic sky, chairmen of all kinds of unions and associations owed their positions to them. So, these were important dinners.

Arkady Borisovich treated issues of political gastronomy with the utmost responsibility: his guest tonight - the one who was to come after their brief conversation with Mitya - was very fond of pilaf, and for this occasion Arkady Borisovich had brought by plane from Bukhara a cook who made the best pilaf in the Soviet Union. To tell the truth, he was looking forward to the meal himself, and now the tempting smell of the cooking pilaf made it a little difficult for him to concentrate.

The silent cook, unhappy that she had to act as a waitress today, silently placed a tray of sandwiches and a carafe of vodka in front of Mitya and Arkady Borisovich. The sandwiches were stuffed with red fish, halibut, and caviar, and the vodka was ice-cold. Arkady Borisovich put the paper down, thanked the cook, and finally turned to Mitya:

- I'll make you a fish day today. Help yourself!

Mitya greedily took a piece of bread with an oily piece of halibut glistening on it - not only had he been unable to work while waiting for the meeting, but he had also only eaten twice at most in the past three days. Arkady Borisovich smiled slightly, poured them vodka and raised a shot glass.

- To the meeting. And to the success of our common endeavor!

Even now, when all his thoughts were occupied with the anticipation of the talk, Mitya still paid attention to the shot glass in his interlocutor's hand. At first glance, it did

not differ from his own, but Mitya noticed that Arkady Borisovich's glass had an excessively massive bottom. And while Mitya's glass contained about fifty grams of vodka, the master of the house had about twenty. Power, Mitya thought, is made of such thoughtful details.

The cold vodka burned his throat pleasantly, and Arkady Borisovich began to speak.

- Your field of interest is genetics, isn't it? I have read your works. I must admit that I understood a little, but it was explained to me that you are interested in the problem of human longevity. Are you looking for ways to prolong our natural life?

Mitya nodded. Arkady Borisovich put the shot glass on the table and leaned toward Mitya.

- You will not tell anyone about our meeting and our conversation.

It was not a question, but a statement. Mitya nodded a second time.

- I have consulted with doctors and scientists, as confidentially as we are talking now, and I am sure that Leonid Ilyich will not live to see another new year. Moreover, I know that this knowledge is possessed not only by me but also by many of those whom you saw at the recent meeting... After Leonid Ilyich's death, a war of heirs will inevitably begin. All those who wish, and I assure you there are plenty of them, will try to take the place of the General Secretary.

Arkady Borisovich said, in general, obvious things, but Mitya listened patiently, assuming that his interlocutor would soon get to the point. And Arkady Borisovich did not deceive his expectations.

- The race for power is exhausting and counterproductive. I have invited you today to ask you: can Soviet science somehow help in this situation? Can your research into the question of human longevity have any practical application?

"That's how my story began. That's how the story of the Institute began." Dmitry Danilovich became silent again. Age was taking its toll, he was getting tired faster and faster, and now he wanted to finish his will and get down to business. But Dmitry Danilovich never abandoned an endeavor halfway through and so he continued.

Arkady Borisovich did not ask Mitya to cure Brezhnev. He offered him to head an institute studying, so to speak, "functional immortality".

It was simple: as long as the General Secretary had any brain activity left, he continued to be General Secretary. This meant that Arkady Borisovich and his allies had time to deal with the issue of the transfer of power in a proper way. Without fuss and unnecessary emotions. In other words, God forbid the Soviet doctors fail and Leonid Ilyich dies, Arkady Borisovich needs a "plan B". He needs a way to restore minimal brain activity to the deceased.

Looking at the dumbfounded Mitya, Arkady Borisovich hastened to clarify:

- I don't demand that you find the secret of eternal life or learn how to raise the dead like the biblical Christ. Not at all! Though, if you had learned to turn water into wine, perhaps I would have said a special "thank" to you.

Arkady Borisovich chuckled at his own joke and Mitya, obeying the unwritten rules of bureaucratic etiquette, smiled forcedly. His interlocutor continued:

- Again, I'm interested in a formal electrical activity. Not consciousness, not the ability to speak or move, just a semi-living brain. If you think that this task is within your power, I will provide you with the resources to solve it.

And Mitya agreed. Actually at that moment, in the arbor under the shade of Peredelkino pines, he turned from the talented Mitya into the respected Dmitry Danilovich, director and founder of the Institute for the Study of Functional Immortality.

Just three weeks later, Dmitry Danilovich was inspecting a modest mansion on Povarskaya Street, across the street from School No. 91. However, the mansion was modest only at first sight. To be exact, it had a secret.

Any passerby who decided to walk from the Arbat to The Garden Ring along the cozy Povarskaya Street could see only two neat floors of the merchant's house from the early XIX century - it was built a few years after the fire of 1812. But only the employees of the institute knew what was underneath the mansion: there were five floors of laboratories, offices, winding corridors and vivariums containing laboratory animals.

Already in October 1982, dozens of scientists began their work. The best minds of the Union, led by Dmitry Danilovich, were working on the immortality serum. The task was obvious - to save fragile brain cells from death without oxygen. After cardiac arrest neurons began to die within minutes, without oxygen and glucose they convulsively gave the last impulses, and flew apart, throwing their contents outside, turning the brain into a jelly.

Dmitry Danilovich was inspired, his eyes were burning, he was flattered by the truly biblical scale of the task set before him. Though immortality may be functional, but he will be able to defeat death! He will be Godlike! Dmitry Danilovich was sincerely convinced that no one in the whole Union was better suited for this role. Arkady Borisovich liked the young scientist's zeal - he had used the fruits of ambitious fanatics' labors more than once. He could count on such an ally.

But the experts Arkady Borisovich consulted were unexpectedly disappointing.

Brezhnev did not live to see the next year - in November he died, and at the same time he ceased to be General Secretary. In the first months after his death, Dmitry Danilovich feared that the Institute would be closed, but under the new General Secretary, Arkady Borisovich lost neither power nor connections. The work continued.

The new Soviet leader was KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov. By the time of his death in February 1984, the Institute was ready to undergo a baptism by fire, but the General Secretary died so suddenly that the scientists had no opportunity to react in time and prepare anything. The "resurrection" experiment was a complete failure. Dmitry Danilovich explained the failure - both to himself and to the dissatisfied Arkady (by then they had already shifted to first name terms) - by the fact that the body was being transported for too long. Arkady promised to correct the mistakes in the future. His gut told him that the new leader, Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko, would not stay long in his post either. He headed the USSR as an aged man who was already seriously ill.

Dmitry Danilovich was not particularly upset that the Institute had failed to keep Andropov's brain from turning into jelly. Personally speaking, the former chekist was very unpleasant to him. Besides, at the time of Andropov's death, Dmitry Danilovich no

longer believed that he was on the right path in his research. He came to this conclusion because of a report he had heard shortly before Secretary General's death about hibernating Arctic animals that were able to survive without oxygen for long periods of time. This report led him to a promising idea.

Dozens of Arctic ground squirrels, naked mole rats, and red-eared slider turtles were brought to the Institute's laboratories. Even three fur seals were brought in.

The unfortunate animals were strangled in chambers filled with carbon dioxide - the scientists observed how their brains survived hypoxia and dissected their unique biochemistry. Dmitry Danilovich didn't care about the mole rats and ground squirrels, but he felt sorry for the seals. His childhood was spent in the Far East, and sometimes he remembered the days when his only friends were the relatives of his present subjects, sunbathing on the beach.

Then came the time of mice, rats and macaques - their blood was injected with cocktails of drugs and proteins that were supposed to prolong the life of the dying brain. Finally, ambulances from Moscow hospitals pulled up to the institute with their windows taped shut. In the silence of the night, without blinkers, they drove up to the building on Povarskaya, and taciturn men in jackets, all buttoned up, took the bodies to the underground laboratories - for the needs of science.

Dmitry Danilovich paused again and sipped from the cup next to him. The cup was filled with calvados, bought for a special occasion for the fabulous sum of twenty thousand dollars. Dmitry Danilovich sighed sadly: he was going to open this bottle in honor of the end of his work, in honor of his victory. Now he was drinking to the day of his death. Well, it was also a "special occasion". There wouldn't be a second one.

He still remembered 1985 and the death of Konstantin Chernenko with a shudder. He remembered how the General Secretary's corpse had been brought into the laboratory - more like a converted operating room. He remembered how Arkady had come in. He remembered his hands shaking a little.

Looking at the ice-covered, naked body of the supreme leader of the Soviet Union, Dmitry Danilovich had an unusual thought: "Yesterday you were on top of the world, and now - a stupid dead old man. And what was all that power worth?"

He was about to say it out loud, to whisper it in Arkady's ear, who had long ago become a senior friend instead of a superior, but then there was an embarrassment.

On Dmitry Danilovich's command, the lab technicians injected the serum: the injections had to be made at the same time into both carotid arteries of the deceased - the artificial heart maintained the blood flow in the General Secretary's body.

Chernenko's electroencephalogram still showed smooth wavy lines: there was no brain activity and no pulse. But slowly and surely, like a rocket over the Plesetsk cosmodrome, the Comrade General Secretary's penis began to rise and increase in size. It was reaching upward. It seemed to be trying to reach the bright fluorescent lights that illuminated the operating room.

A laugh came from one of the lab technicians. It wasn't just a laugh or a chuckle, but a horselaugh that sounded particularly out of place in the stony silence.

Arkady was screaming. Screaming terribly. Dmitry Danilovich had never seen his

friend in such a state either before or after. He shouted that all Institute's employees would be sent to the Gulag. Yes, he knew that the Gulag had been closed, but on such an occasion it would be opened, no doubt about it. He shouted that even the families of the Institute's employees would feel his wrath and be sent to Siberia to cut timber. Even the pets!

With great effort, Dimitri Danilovich managed to calm his benefactor by convincing him that this was a normal phenomenon, described in the Middle Ages in the case of hanged men. The irony of the situation was increased by the fact that Secretary general's penis quickly went into rigor mortis, and the lab technicians finally had to cut off the stubborn organ with a surgical saw. It was packed in a vacuum bag and placed in the inner pocket of the deceased's jacket.

It seemed that this was the end of the Institute, but after several months of silence, Arkady Borisovich called, and everyone continued to live as before.

Neither of them liked the new General Secretary. First of all, he found out about the Institute and came with an inspection. With a slight smile, he went through all five underground floors. He did not close them, but with his whole appearance he showed his disregard for the important business the employees of the Institute were doing. Disregard and disbelief. Secondly, there was something about Mikhail Gorbachev that particularly affected Arkady Borisovich - a sense of novelty. A sense of change that could disrupt the measured rhythm of his life. In fact, he did not feel the full force of these changes. Arkady Borisovich died just a week before the August 1991 coup.

When the USSR had collapsed, Dmitry Danilovich thought that the Institute would be closed for sure. But even this time the Institute was lucky. Money, though small, continued to come in. It was impossible to make a scientific breakthrough with it, so the Institute and its work survived the nineties thanks mainly to the mishap with Chernenko. Dmitry Danilovich kept the recipe for the serum given to the deceased General Secretary and for a decade it was used to treat impotence of Moscow businessmen and politicians for a lot of money.

The institute survived until the new millennium. Dmitry Danilovich long ago had lost his enthusiasm, it seemed to him that all his work was in vain. He began to seriously consider retirement. And then - Dmitry Danilovich remembered exactly the day and hour when this significant event happened - an employee of the new Presidential Administration came to his office. It was June 23, 2005.

The employee was young, modestly dressed, of small stature, with a bald patch and a slight stutter. He politely asked Dmitry Danilovich about his work, about the progress made, about the prospects, and then said that Mr. President was interested in the Institute's research - he said these words in such a tone of voice that Dmitry Danilovich thought he literally heard capital letters. But Mr. President was interested not in functional immortality at all, but in real immortality. An employee of the administration immediately made a reservation: "immortality" in the context of their

conversation doesn't mean eternal life, of course, but Vladimir Vladimirovich would like to live at least up to 120 years.

At first, as Dmitry Danilovich liked to tell his close friends, the Institute received a golden shower. Then one of his younger colleagues explained to him the meaning of this term, and Dmitry Danilovich began to use a different phrase, but the essence of it did not change: the institute was drowning in money. All the equipment, all the foreign conferences, everything was the best, the most expensive. And the most important thing was that he did not have to report. He could spend the money as he saw necessary. The main thing is the result. The person from the Administration also said about it directly: we do not expect it quickly, but in ten or fifteen years.....

At first, Dmitry Danilovich, inspired by the sudden funding, began research with redoubled vigor. Together with his young colleagues, he came to the conclusion that serum was not suitable for their purposes; it was necessary to experiment with viruses.

The professor's developments on serum needed to be delivered to each brain cell, making it almost immortal. This required a virus that could deliver the necessary genes to each cell. The choice fell on rhabdoviruses, or more specifically, the well-studied rabies virus. Genetic engineers stripped it of its ability to replicate outside the special cells inside the lab, and instead encoded a few genes there that would allow the brain to survive even in the harshest conditions.

And then, perhaps predictably, Dmitry Danilovich developed a taste for money. It wasn't counted, it wasn't asked for, and he began to spend it. And after him, other employees of the Institute began to spend it as well. One day Dmitry Danilovich heard that Gulia, the cleaning lady, had bought a duplex apartment in a small resort town in Spain. Dmitry Danilovich knew that Spain was full of "cheap", in his opinion, apartments, so the news did not surprise him.

The man from the Administration came several more times. Before each of these visits, and they were never unexpected, the IT department of the institute, together with hired (for a lot of money) animation creators made a video presentation telling about the progress. And that seemed to be enough.

But while Dmitry Danilovich was living the best life at the expense of the state, some employees continued their experiments. The virus they modified became more and more effective. After studying the research of the Japanese Shinya Yamanaka, one of the most talented employees of the Institute, a graduate of the biological faculty of the Moscow State University Veronica, proposed to supplement the virus with factors that rejuvenate the cells of the body. It was a simple and at the same time absolutely brilliant idea, which Dmitry Danilovich did not fail to appropriate for himself. But not to recognize the merits of some upstart, especially a woman!

Dmitry Danilovich finished his calvados and picked up the phone from the table. The finale of his will was approaching.

"You know what the funniest thing is, Luda," Dmitry Danilovich addressed the last word to his wife, who had long since died of cancer: "The funny thing is that it was greed that ruined us. We got used to stealing. As if we had enough money, we already took as much as we could: with our mouths and our asses we took as much as we could! We'd have enough for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren! But no, they couldn't stop. A year ago, when the Institute was being renovated, they decided to make money out of it too, and instead of expensive German wiring, they put in our native wiring. Cheap. According to the documents, everything was as it should be, but in fact..."

In fact, the cables flickered and there was a fire. It wasn't a big problem, but while the Institute staff was busy fighting the fire and evacuating the building, several animals used in behavioral experiments escaped from the labs. Some of them were infected with the virus - in fact, the virus was being tested on them. And then...

"Next, Luda, we had a plan. Instructions for just such a case - what to do if there was a sudden emergency in the Institute and the virus broke out. The security officer on the first floor was to fill the rooms with freon, which would put out the fire. Seal everyone in, cut them off from the outside world, and suffocate them with gas. Sacrifice people to prevent a great disaster. But this officer had a girl he loved underground, and he had pity on her and let her out. And that was it..."

Now it's really over. Dmitry Danilovich stood up, walked shakily to the window and looked out at Moscow. On a normal day, his favorite city would have woken up long ago and lived its usual life. It was noisy, rustling, chirping. The scientist sighed heavily.

Staggering, he approached the stool. An hour ago he had taken the expensive chandelier off the hook in the ceiling and attached a rope loop to it. He made sure it wouldn't break. It would hold. Dmitry Danilovich climbed onto the stool and put the rope around his neck.

"I have become the death, the destroyer of worlds!" - that was what Oppenheimer said, wasn't it?

Dmitry Danilovich said these words aloud, though no one in the empty apartment could hear them. What a welp! Your bomb is nothing compared to this...

- I'll be the destroyer of worlds...

And with these words, after taking a last look at his wasted life, Mitya (and now, of course, it was Mitya) stepped forward. Bones crunched, the rope creaked, the overturned stool fell on the expensive parquet.

CHAPTER 1

The ice cream bought at the park entrance has cracked. It happens with ice cream: you bite into the chocolate shell, it cracks, and sometimes a whole piece of chocolate falls off at once. Good thing he had time to notice, Seva thought, chewing the cold chocolate. At least it didn't fall on the asphalt! He turned his head and looked at Kostik - his brother was walking next to him, chewing his waffle cup.

It was their tradition, and Seva was quietly proud of it - he had invented it last year. He and Kostya went to different schools, and on the last day of school, Seva would pick up his younger brother himself. They would buy ice cream and walk home through the park, talking, enjoying each other's company and the feeling of freedom. The whole summer was ahead of them.

Seva loved the last day of spring. It gave him such a magical, even somewhat New Year's feeling. You found a present under the tree. It's a big box wrapped in beautiful colored paper by your mother. You start unwrapping it and your whole being is filled with magical anticipation: what is there, what is the gift? It was the same with the last day of spring. Summer is coming - and for now, this summer is just a holiday box in a joyful package. Tomorrow morning he and Kostya will start unpacking it. What's inside?

For as long as Seva could remember, he and his family have traveled to the sea every summer. At 15, Seva was an experienced traveler - he had been to Israel, Spain, Italy, Croatia, and Slovenia. Some trips he remembered vaguely because he was very young, but mom and dad would show him pictures and he knew for sure - yes, for real I was there. Then Kostik came along and they started traveling together.

But this summer there would be no trip abroad. At first Seva was upset - how could it be summer without the sea? But then he thought he could bear it for a year: after all, they had just moved into a new apartment. Their own apartment! In which he got a room! In the old apartment he and Kostya had to live together, and here he would finally have his own room. For that they could do without the sea for a year.

Kostya did not share his brother's enthusiasm.

It was funny, Seva thought, because Kostya was the most active, the most jumping, the loudest and the bravest in our family, but he was afraid of any change, any transformation. He did not want to leave the old house where he was born and lived all his life. He did not want to miss a trip to the sea, and he certainly did not want his own room, so he would no longer be able to crawl under his older brother's warm blanket in the morning and sleep with him in his arms until mom or dad came to wake them up to school.

Kostya was somewhat reconciled to the need for change by his mother's promise to return to the dog issue. Dad, Kostya and Seva were absolutely sure that life without a dog was incomplete, and it was urgent to fix it. Mom wanted a dog, too, but reasonably objected that it would be necessary to walk it in rain, snow, and heat. Every day. As part of the campaign to change mom's mind, Seva began taking Kostya for a demonstration walk.

The experiment lasted exactly one week - right up to the moment when the boys went for a walk in a downpour, got wet, caught a cold, and stayed home with a fever for a week. Seva missed an important math test, and his teacher, Anastasia Mikhailovna, was terribly displeased with him.

The ice cream ran out and Seva started chewing on a wooden stick. He always did that before throwing it in the garbage. Kostik had also finished his ice cream - he chewed it all the way to the bottom of the cup. For some reason, he absolutely refused to eat those waffle cups.

The brothers' backpacks were light today - they had returned all their textbooks, so only workbooks and empty lunchboxes hung over their shoulders. Kostya squeezed

his eyes shut with joy. What could be better than walking through the park with his brother? With a belly full of ice cream, with the whole summer ahead of us?

- We'll come home and play right away, won't we? - Kostya looked hopefully at his brother.

For the past three weeks, he had been waiting for a chance to play GTA Online with Seva. Mom and Dad bought a second TV for the new apartment, and Kostya with Seva had been saving money for the last year to buy a second PS4 game console on Avito. They saved up and bought it, but they had to do their homework, or they couldn't go to bed late, or other things - the boys couldn't manage to just sit down and play quietly. But today they finally will! Four hours at least.

- Let's go over the heists first, shall we? Nikita told me there's a mission where you steal a fighter jet from an aircraft carrier. And then the races!

- We should play as much as possible before we leave," Seva said.

Then Kostya remembered the trip and sulked.

- I don't want to go on a trip!

Seva sighed. Damn it, he reminded his brother about the upcoming trip.

Dad and Mom had decided that this year the family couldn't go without rest, so if the sea didn't work out, they would go camping. To Karelia. With backpacks, tents, sleeping at a beautiful lake and a complete lack of internet. Kostya was outraged.

And actually he would like it, Seva was absolutely sure. But that was the way it always was with his brother: first he would be scolded and angry when faced with a new experience, and then he would enthusiastically tell his grandfather how cool everything was. It was a kind of ritual, psychologically necessary for Kostya, but a bit exhausting for the rest of the family.

When he first heard about the trip, he googled the word "Karelia" and found mosquitoes. And now he remembered them exactly.

- Damn it! There are mosquitoes! I don't want the mosquitoes! I read that there are so many of them that they can take a cat with them! What if they take me?!

- Well, first of all, they can't, - smiled Seva. - They say that as a joke. Secondly, neither I nor mother and father will let anyone take you away. Well, mosquitoes bite us a little, so they bite us and at the dacha! But I've learned some scary stories. We'll sit in the forest in the evening, by the fire, the stars above us, and I'll tell you and dad some cool scary stories....

Kostya nodded distractedly. Actually, he was afraid of horror stories, but Seva loved them so much that he didn't want to spoil his brother's pleasure. Besides, Kostya liked the idea of them all sitting around the fire together. He liked the feeling of being part of a family.

He thoughtfully kicked an empty beer can that was lying on the park path. Then he ran after it, picked it up and threw it in the trash can. Seva had taught him that. - First we'll go camping, then, Mom said, we can go to Grandma and Grandpa's cottage, and then we'll hang out in the new house: play every day, go to the cinema with Dad and Mom!

- Yes! Play every day! Dad will always find something for us to do, make us read or help around the house.

The park ended and a busy street appeared ahead. Now he and Seva would go to

the bus stop, wait for the bus, and be home in 20 minutes. And finally, summer would officially begin for them.

The emergency, about which Professor Mikhailin told his deceased wife in a suicide audio message, took place at the Institute for the Study of Functional Immortality at half past six in the morning. At that time, there were only six people at work - the lab technicians on duty who monitored the condition of the animals and controlled the progress of the experiments. The ground floors of the building were empty. There was only one guard, Pasha, in the gatehouse.

Sitting in front of a dozen monitors, Pasha looked not at them, but at the tablet on which the final episode of the first season of the series "Epidemic" was playing. Pasha's girlfriend, Veronica, buzzed all his ears about what a wonderful story it was and how different it was from all the previous Russian series Pasha had seen. In general, Pasha treated the series calmly and rarely watched them, but "Epidemic" suddenly seized him. He was so fascinated that he decided to go to the bookstore after work and buy a book by Jana Wagner "Vongozero", on which the series is based. He wanted to relive all the adventures he had just seen on the screen once again. If Pasha had survived and put his plan into action, he would have been the one who would have been disappointed by the book - there was too much psychological drama and not enough adventure for him... But he didn't survive.

Pasha missed the moment when the fire started, and he also missed the fact that the fire alarm did not go off. One of the lab technicians noticed the fire at the moment when the lower floor was filled with acrid smoke - cheap wiring and plastic panels that covered the walls of the Institute's corridors emit toxic smoke when burning.

Fire extinguishers and fire alarm buttons hung on the walls of the Institute in places that were strictly marked on the fire evacuation plan. When the lab technician saw the smoke, he ran to raise the alarm, but he could not do so immediately. Some of the buttons were not even plugged in, they were just hanging there to look at and for the fire inspector corrupted on Mikhailin's payrolls. Some of the smoke detectors had been disconnected a long time ago by the employees themselves due to the periodic false alarms.

Pasha knew what to do. Next to several telephones on his desk there was a panic button under a protective cover - so that God forbid it was accidentally pressed. This button not only called the fire department, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, Professor Mikhailin, and the entire management of the Institute, but also filled the lower floor with gas. If he pressed it now, the only door leading to the surface would be blocked, and only Professor Mikhailin himself could open it with a special key. Press it now, and the elevator carrying the smoke-inhaled lab technicians up from the lower floors will stop. Press it now and his Veronica would be trapped underground forever.

Pasha began frantically looking around the monitors, trying to find Veronica. She wasn't in the elevator, she wasn't in the labs or the corridors... Finally he saw her - Veronica was running up the stairs. She seemed to be the only one of all the employees who remembered the rule "do not use the elevator in case of fire". Pasha noticed that she hadn't forgotten her bag.

Veronica ran to the hermetic door that separated the lower levels from the ground floor of the Institute, stopped, and looked into the security camera. Right at Pasha. There were tears in her eyes. She knew what the guard had to do, and she begged him - he was sure of it - to spare her life. To save her. And Pasha couldn't stand it. He opened the door, and only when Veronica was on the surface did he press the panic button.

After catching her breath, Veronica began to undress. She explained to the astonished Pasha that the only way a person could become infected with the virus being studied at the Institute was through blood. In the panic and confusion of the fire, many laboratory animals had escaped from their cages, and in the smoke Veronica herself might not have noticed that she had been bitten by a ground squirrel.

Together they examined every part of her body. There were no bites.

They sat in each other's arms for another ten minutes, and then Pasha said Veronica had better go home. The violation of instructions would probably come to light, but maybe they'd get lucky. Veronica dressed and went outside. She breathed in the morning Moscow air and walked briskly to the Arbatskaya metro station.

On the way, she thought about how close she and Pasha had come to death today, and how Pasha had risked everything to save her. Their romance, or rather silly affair, began quite by chance: Veronica responded to some of Pasha's silly pick-up line. Not because it "worked," but because she was curious, because, this reserved and untypically handsome boxing champion of the Altufievo district was very different from the other men.

Pasha could hardly guess it - he was not so much a naturally stupid man as a bleary-eyed one - but today Veronica was going to tell him that their relationship had exhausted itself. That she wanted to move on, to build a career, to grow spiritually, and that her personal development plan did not include Pasha. But with everything that had happened, the plan apparently needed to be revised. "He took a risk! Risked his job, his safety ... So he loves, so really loves," - she thought, going down the escalator to "Arbatskaya". Perhaps a few more weeks of the relationship Pasha has bought today with his heroism. Somehow she did not think at all about the dead colleagues who had suffocated in the underground of the institute.

Veronica had to walk through the station, go up another long escalator and go to the "Biblioteka Imeni Lenina", from where the train would take her to the "Universitet", where she had rented a cozy studio apartment right next to the metro. She was in a hurry. She wanted to take a shower, maybe drink some tea, and go to bed sooner rather than later.

And she suddenly felt terribly thirsty and Veronica remembered that she had an unfinished bottle of water in her bag.

Laboratory mice had no names, only inventory numbers. The white mouse of the balb/c line, which was now hiding at the bottom of Veronika's bag, had the number MB1#99324. The mouse had been infected yesterday with the GluN2D-OSKM-V23 variant of the Mikhailin virus (as the Institute staff called it among themselves). For

unknown reasons, the virus was completely harmless to mice and rats, but had many side effects for primates and probably humans. Mikhailin urged his subordinates to find out the reasons for this anomaly - it seemed to him that the answer to this question would help them solve the main problem of the virus they had created. And the problem was extraordinary.

Dmitry Danilovich Mikhailin really managed to defeat death. He reported about it to an employee of the Presidential Administration with a certain pleasure and even invited him to a test demonstration. The aged AP employee, who had been seriously promoted since their first meeting, watched in amazement as one of the laboratory technicians injected a virus into an absolutely dead chimpanzee, and the chimpanzee revived! Well, "revived": moved, began to make terrible noises.

It was a clear victory for science. The only problem was that the Mikhailin virus not only "revived" its victim - it started an endless "death/life/death" cycle in the organism. Depending on the state of the infected person's immune system, the length of his postmortem "life" varied. The chimpanzee on which Mikhailin performed a demonstration experiment was completely healthy and therefore "revived" and began to throw itself on the thick glass separating its cage from the observational room. The scene was truly frightening.

The employee of the administration looked at Mikhailin with surprise and even fear, but the professor was glowing with joy and did not share the fears read in the eyes of the guest.

- And what explains such aggressive behavior?

- It's nothing, don't pay attention, - Professor Mikhailin waved the question away with visible irritation. - Think about it, history is being made before your eyes! We have already won a great victory - we have managed to reverse death! Now all that's left is to refine the virus, to teach it to self-destruct immediately after resurrection.

The Administration employee was a man of no small mind. Listening to the scientist's enthusiastic explanations, he thought, not for the first time, that it was time to close this place down before this madman caused any trouble. Besides, there was another question on his mind:

- What would happen if the virus infected a living person?

Mikhailin took off his glasses and looked intently at his interlocutor:

- Under no circumstances can we allow that. Our virus is lethal to a living person. But do not worry, the Institute has taken all safety measures, and the probability of such an infection is zero. You don't need to worry.

That was the end of the conversation. Mikhailin did not know it, but when his interlocutor returned to the Staraya Square, he sat down to write a memo, the meaning of which was roughly as follows: the task at hand is impossible, and now it is urgently necessary to dissolve the Institute. The building would be sold, and the staff would be transferred to Professor Kovalchuk in "Kurchatnik". The honorable Dmitry Danilovich will be retired - he has enough money: the professor thought in vain that his financial tricks were unknown to the management; but people in boring suits had written down all his moves.

Close it down. Burn and salt the place where the Institute was. Before it's too late.

It was already too late, but there was no way the official from the Staraya Square could have known that. Nor could he have guessed the magnitude of the disaster that would threaten the entire world if the virus were released into the wild. But Veronica and her lab colleagues did not need to guess - they had run simulations.

According to them, the infectivity of the Mikhailin virus in the "wild" will be about 84%, and the mortality - about 90%. Once inside the human body, it would multiply uncontrollably and be transmitted by airborne droplets. In theory, the virus should not be able to do this - that is, to replicate outside the packer cells from which it was derived. But stubbornly, one virus in a million was grabbing the gene it needed to replicate from the cells, and just one copy was enough to start replicating in the body. The only good news was that the virus could not survive long in the open air, and the epidemic, if it occurred, would be relatively short-lived.

After studying the results of the simulations, Mikhailin became furious. Under the threat of being fired, he demanded that all the participants in the study, especially Veronica, never again discuss the subject within the walls of the Institute, and certainly not outside. He destroyed all copies of the simulations, keeping only one for himself. He printed it out on a printer, put it in the vault, and tried to forget that it ever existed. He wanted to forget what those infected who were unlucky enough to be resurrected would become.

Veronica was a tenacious scientist, and it was important to her to know what she was working with. Of course, no one at the Institute ever mentioned the word "soul," but the fact that an infected person lost consciousness upon his first death was grudgingly acknowledged even by Mikhailin himself. The resurrected showed enviable electro-brain activity, but it was specific.

With incredible effort, Veronica and her colleagues managed to drag one of the infected chimpanzees into the MRT machine and, as she had expected, the images clearly showed: the lateral nucleus of the hypothalamus was glowing like a light bulb on a Christmas tree. The infected chimpanzee no longer felt pain or fear, he didn't want to sleep or think, his entire consciousness was filled with one feeling: insatiable hunger.

Once, in her youth, Veronica was very fond of Strugatsky's novel "Monday Begins on Saturday," in which Professor Vybegailo created "a cadaver not satisfied stomach-wise. Infected people would turn to such cadavers. Well, not all of them - people with weak immunity, the elderly and small children would probably just die. Not quickly and not easily, but they would die, having previously infected everyone around them. But the healthy? The Institute staff tried not to think about that, preferring to concentrate on the task at hand.

In the depths of the bag, the mouse numbered MB1#99324 was suffering. Her day had not gone well: first, she had been injected with some nasty stuff during the night, and it had hurt. Even though the virus didn't work on mice, MB1#99324 felt the pain of the injection perfectly. Then, just as she was falling asleep, an alarm went off, and a few minutes later, the box in which she had spent her youth fell off the table where the virus was being injected into the lab mice and shattered. In a panic, MB1#99324 began searching for the nearest hiding place. It turned out to be Veronica's bag, which she had left near the entrance to the vivarium, in violation of all safety rules.

But the hiding place was doubtful: at one moment everything was calm and quiet

in the bag, at another it was shaking, bumping into something, and the unfortunate mouse was shaking terribly inside. But now - the sky opened above her, and a human hand tried to grab her. In fact, Veronica was just trying to find a bottle of water in her bag by feel. MB1#99324 couldn't know that, of course, and so it bit Veronica's index finger as hard as it could, releasing all its accumulated resentment and pain within that bite.

Veronica screamed. Passengers standing nearby turned in displeasure and surprise. The bag fell onto the escalator and the mouse jumped out.

She looked in horror at the drops of blood from her bitten finger.

In the minute it took Veronica to get off the escalator, she had infected everyone on it. And the mouse with the number MB1#99324 safely reached the bottom of the escalator and ran towards the tunnel, where she finally found the long-awaited peace and feeling of safety.

The Moscow metro transports more than 10 million passengers every day. None of the people standing next to Veronica gave any special meaning to her screams, while Veronica herself was in a panic and could not clearly explain what danger threatened them all. And what use would that have been?

A few minutes later the first infected people arrived at the busiest station - "Komsomolskaya". More than 150 thousand people pass through it every day. The virus did not appear immediately, in some cases it took more than 15 minutes, but it was inevitable.

When the mouse bit Veronika's index finger, it was 08:01 on the clock. Already at 09:00 the first cases of an unknown terrible disease were recorded in Vykhino, at 11:15 - at the metro station "Bittsevsky Park", and at 13:45 there was not a single uninfected district in Moscow. The city was rapidly dying.

Kostya and Seva got off the bus and were almost jumping in the direction of the house. Almost, because Seva walked calmly and Kostya walked, sprinted and jumped up and down with joy and anticipation.

The boys liked their new home and enjoyed settling in. It was a nice apartment complex with a quiet courtyard, and most of the windows of their apartment looked out over the courtyard. There was no parking in the courtyard, but there were cool playgrounds and sports fields and young trees. When the trees grew up, their bedrooms would be shady and cozy - that's what Mom said. Dad explained that these apartments were called "raspashonkas" because their windows faced different sides of the house: their new kitchen windows faced the street, and they could see the metro station. In general, Mom and Dad did not want windows facing the noisy street, but the price was too tempting. And it will be easier to air the apartment, Mom said.

Seva's shoelace came untied. He stopped and put his foot on the curb. For some reason, the laces on his new sneakers came untied a lot, so once again Seva was determined and focused on tying the laces so that they would never come untied again. He was fully focused on this task when he was grabbed by Kostya's shoulder.

- Wait a minute! Let me tie your shoelace!

Kostya didn't answer, but squeezed his brother's shoulder even harder, making Seva feel a little pain.

- Damn it!" Seva looked up at Kostya.

His brother was holding Seva's shoulder with one hand and pointing deep into the yard with the other. From there, the dogs - three yokes - were rushing at them. A small corgi - the brothers had met him the day they moved in - a german shepherd and a pekingese were running away from the house. Dogs, of course, are more difficult to deal with than people, but it seemed to both boys that panic was written all over the dogs' faces. Seva looked surprised at the normally calm and familiar dogs.

- What's wrong with them?

Kostya insistently pointed his finger in the direction of the yard - he was obviously trying to show his brother something, not the dogs. Seva looked: there was a woman lying on the ground near the playground. To be exact, not lying - squirming in terrible convulsions. He recognized her immediately, it was Svetlana Petrovna, the owner of the corgi, a smiling retired teacher. Red foam was coming out of her mouth. She either arched her whole body, doing the gymnastics bridge, or suddenly fell unconscious on the asphalt. These were not human movements - it was as if something had entered Svetlana Petrovna's body and was struggling to get out. The woman wriggled once more, collapsed back onto the asphalt and froze.

Seva rose abruptly, grabbed his brother's hand and dragged him toward the entrance hall.

- Let's go inside. Let's go inside and I'll call an ambulance. And you call Mom.

- Maybe Mom is already home?

Kostya's voice was equal parts fear and hope.

- Maybe she is. Or maybe Dad came home early....

Seva wanted to believe that, too.

The brothers walked just a few meters, avoiding the bushes that obscured the playground, next to which was a separate fenced area for walking dogs. Next to the dog playground there were the bodies of three women. They were lying motionless, with their heads thrown back unnaturally, in strange twisted poses. They were obviously the owners of the running dogs.

It was no longer Seva pulling Kostya - the frightened brother began to run, and Seva ran beside him. It was only a short distance to the entrance. Out of the corner of his eye, Seva saw some movement near the house, where there were large dumpsters. He stopped for a second and took a closer look.

Ilnar, their janitor, was leaning against the brick wall of the house. Seva knew him by name because Ilnar always said hello to him, and in general, his father had taught him to be polite to everyone: janitors and presidents alike. Ilnar was breathing heavily. His chin was smeared with the same reddish foam that Seva had just seen on dead women (he had no doubt that they were dead). The man was making strange noises, something between wheezing and throat singing. Only the singing was high-pitched. Creepy. Animal-like.

Ilnar turned his head toward the boys, and Seva instinctively took a step back: those terrible white eyes could not belong to a living person. Ilnar looked like a...

- A zombie. He had become a zombie...

Kostya said these words almost in a whisper, as if he did not believe in the reality of what was happening. Zombies exist only in movies or games, not in the cozy yard of their new home. Zombies are strangers, the good-natured janitor who once gave Kostya a candy "Korovka" does not turn into a zombie.

Ilnar stood up, but not like a human being. A man would have put his hands on the asphalt, or maybe on the wall. Ilnar just stood up and ran towards the boys.

Seva froze. Like a rabbit that jumped out onto the highway and was hit in the face by the blinding light of the headlights, he forgot for a second what he was doing and just stared into the face of the approaching danger. Kostya grabbed him and dragged him to the entrance.

There were facial recognition cameras in the housing complex doors, and it was probably this that saved the brothers' lives. The door opened just as Kostya made it to the threshold. They piled into the entrance and Seva slammed the door. There was a thud. Ilnar hadn't knocked. Seva realized that he had just kept running, crashing through the door.

Without saying a word, breathing heavily, the brothers ran up to the third floor. Only at the fifth time Kostya reached for the keyhole with trembling hands. They closed the door behind them. Both the lock and the bolt.

- Mom?

No, there was no mother. The apartment was cold and empty. Kostya and Seva, without taking off their shoes, walked through the living room and out onto the balcony, from where their entrance hall was clearly visible. Ilnar stopped trying to get through the door. With a shaky walk, he went to the street. Seva found his brother's hand and squeezed it.

There Ilnar suddenly stopped and fell. His body began to twist in the same convulsions that had twisted their elderly neighbor lady near the playground a few minutes before.

- Seva, I'm scared!

- Don't be afraid. Mom will be here soon. And so will Dad. Everything will be fine!

He said these words louder on purpose so that he could believe them himself.

Because it was true, Dad and Mom were going to come, and it was going to be safe with them. And they will hug each other. And everything will be okay, won't it?

Ilnar's body stopped shaking in the courtyard. He stood up. Just like the last time - just changed his horizontal position into an upright one. He raised his head, looked to the balcony from which the boys were watching him, and howled.

Kostya and Seva ran into the apartment and closed the balcony door tightly.

CHAPTER 2

A sharp, annoying noise woke Father Sergius up from a pleasant dream. He was dreaming about the sea. Dry but soft sand - almost weightless. Grass growing through it. A very light breeze and the barely perceptible sound of the waves.

He rose abruptly in bed. Fumbled for his phone and turned the sound off. The faster you get out of bed, the easier it is to wake up - this was the second important "lifehack" related to sleep that Sergiy discovered as he grew older. According to the first

one, if you want to take a nap during the day, you should sleep for no more than forty minutes, so that your body does not have time to fall into the deep sleep phase. That's why Father Sergius set a timer, not an alarm clock, when he returned from the liturgy today. For thirty-nine minutes. Today was his big day, and he wasn't going to waste a minute. Today was his and Mother's day off.

It was a tradition they had started before they were married, when Father Sergius was a freckled seminarian named Serezha and Mother Marina was a nineteen-year-old girl with a long russet braid. Every weekend Marina came to visit him in Sergiev Posad. She was one of dozens of Orthodox girls who visited the church of the Seminary at the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, hoping to meet a future husband there: after graduating from the seminary, young men were ordained, and it was strictly necessary to marry before the rite, otherwise you would remain single for the rest of your life.

One day after the service, they met by chance at the door of the church. Seryozha and Marina walked around the Lavra, went to the surrounding attractions - to the Abramtsevo reserve, to the neighboring Semkhoz, where at first she was very embarrassed to swim with him, but then she stopped being embarrassed and they splashed together in the lake. For Seryozha, she became the only one.

Father Sergius distracted himself from pleasant memories. Today it was easy - today he and Mother would make new ones for themselves.

The weekend was unofficial. Father Sergius had taken great efforts to organize his schedule so that at least one Saturday a month (Sunday was out of the question, too much parish business fell on that day) he was free: without weddings, baptisms, funerals, without rites and home visits to the sick, without any boring bureaucratic or administrative issues. It was their Saturday with Marina, and they had a wonderful plan for it.

They would meet at "Pushkinskaya" in the center of the hall, walk to the garden "Hermitage" and have lunch at the cafe "32.05". Father Sergius earned little money, but he had enough for a cafe and a movie once a month.

Then they would walk along the boulevards to "Trubnaya" and go to "Five Stars" on "Novokuznetskaya", where there was third day of a retrospective of films by Father Sergius's favorite director - Wes Anderson. They didn't get to see their favorite "The Incredible Mr. Fox", but "Kingdom of the Full Moon" will be shown, a movie that he and Marina loved very much and had never seen on the big screen.

Yes, today would be a great day! The main thing now was not to waste time and to enjoy every minute of it.

They lived, albeit in a small but wonderful apartment near the metro station "Novokuznetskaya", which they rented for a very godly price from a parishioner of the Holy Trinity Church, where Father Sergius served. The church was on Pyatnitskaya Street. It was only a fifteen-minute walk from the house, and today, after the liturgy, Sergius walked home in ten minutes. While he slept, Marina took their one-year-old daughter Valya to her grandmother in Chertanovo. Now Father Sergius will get dressed and hurry to meet her.

He went to the bathroom, quickly brushed his teeth, washed his face, put on a clean T-shirt and jeans under the ironed cassock, and sat down on a small stool in the hall. He had managed to put on his right sneaker when the phone rang - Father Sergius

had left it on the bedside table next to him while he tied his shoes. It was Marina calling. He looked at the phone in surprise - Marina was making a video call for some reason - and swiped his finger across the screen answering the call.

Sergius didn't immediately realize what was happening. On the phone screen, Marina was running somewhere, holding the phone in her outstretched hand. For some reason, Valenka was not in a stroller, Marina was holding the girl under her arm. She was screaming and crying with fear. Marina was crying too.

- Seryooooooooozha!!!!

She was screaming, gasping for breath, and Father Sergius couldn't understand what was happening. He looked helplessly at the screen. Marina was running. Behind her, Father Sergius saw the exit of the "Chertanovo" metro station - Mother was running away from it towards the ponds.

Sergius opened his mouth to say something, to ask, "What happened?" but then a man in a police uniform appeared on the screen behind Marina. He took his automatic rifle off his shoulder and started firing short bursts somewhere in the direction of the metro.

- Marina?! Marina, what's going on? Why are they shooting? Why is Valya not in the baby stroller?

Marina did not answer, just screamed again:

- Sergey!

Then she suddenly stopped, looked somewhere ahead and to the right, saw something. Turned back to Father Sergius.

- I love you. And Valya loves you very much.

Everything in Father Sergius became cold, everything clenched, a cold sweat broke out. He realized that right now, in this second, his life would change forever. Change terribly. He wanted to look away from the screen, but he couldn't.

On the screen, someone swooped down on Marina from the side and grabbed Valenka out of her arms. Marina screamed and struggled. On the screen there was a splash, then a stream of blood. Father Sergius watched in horror as a figure - a man in shorts and a short-sleeved shirt - casually ripped off his daughter's head. Marina was kneeling over the body. One second - and she was swept away by the human flow.

Her phone remained on the ground, and Father Sergius, dazed with horror, watched as people ran and ran over him, with horrible faces, distorted by some otherworldly rage, with eyes rolled so that only the whites were visible.

He threw up in the hallway, but he didn't notice.

On stiff legs, in one sneaker, Father Sergius went into the kitchen - there was a TV hanging over the table. He and Marina didn't watch it, but Valenka sometimes watched "Smeshariki" on the "Carousel" channel during breakfast. To tell you the truth, Valenka was too young to watch "Smeshariki," but Father Sergius himself always liked those cartoons.

He grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. He found "Channel One". One of his parishioners had once told Father Sergius that there was only one program on Russian television that was still aired live - "News" on "Channel One". It was a few minutes after noon. Father Sergius stared at the screen.

There, Ekaterina Andreeva said: "Moscow demands that Kiev fulfill the Minsk

agreements. According to Vyacheslav Volodin, the chairman of the State Duma, Russia will always protect the rights of the Donbass citizens. At this point, Ekaterina Andreeva fell silent. Her eyes rolled back, as if she had been paralyzed. Her mouth twitched nervously, a trickle of blood flowed from her nostril. Ekaterina Andreeva bent over - Father Sergius recoiled from the screen, he had seen such plasticity in people only once, in the movie "The Exorcist".

The convulsion released the speaker, she looked directly into the camera with white eyes and howled terribly.

Sergius turned off the television. He just stood there for a few seconds, then went to the window that led to the small balcony. The windows of their modest apartment on the fifth floor overlooked Sadovnichesky Proyezd - Father Sergius stepped out onto the balcony and looked down.

A tram was on the way from the "Novokuznetskaya" metro station in the direction of "Paveletskaya". Before reaching the restaurant "Simple Things" the tram stopped abruptly. Gunshots were heard, one of the side windows of the tram shattered. A man not even jumped out but fell out of the tram, with his jacket torn. He ran a few meters, stopped and emptied the clip of his pistol into the tram. Then he staggered towards Pyatnitskaya, but did not go five meters - he fell, his body began to beat the same convulsion that Father Sergius had just seen live on "Channel One".

Sergius looked to his left - a crowd was running down Novokuznetskaya Street from the Church of Pope Clement. Hundreds, if not thousands of people, driven forward by blind panic and animal fear. They fell, stepped on each other, some began to convulse. First the infected fell, and then, after recovering, got up and, with incredible strength and fury, attacked the first people they met, tearing them apart with their hands, gnawing at them with their teeth....

The tram coming from the "Paveletskaya" did not slow down before the intersection, on the contrary, it accelerated and crashed into the dense crowd at full speed. It went off the rails, but the force of inertia pulled it forward. After sweeping away about a dozen people, both infected and healthy, the tram slammed sideways into the summer veranda of Simple Things, which had been built last week, when the weather had finally turned sunny and warm in Moscow.

With empty eyes, Father Sergius watched what was happening. He heard the screams, the terrible howling of the infected, the scraping of metal, gunshots, explosions, the crackling of the fire in the cafe.

Human beings are organized in that way, so that even after receiving much evidence to the contrary, they are still not ready to accept the terrible truth.

Father Sergius went back to the corridor and picked up his phone: the fearful and cautious Marina forbade him to do so, but he still sometimes watched Navalny's investigations and the streaming of other guys from the ACF team. All of them aroused Father Sergius' great respect. He opened YouTube and clicked on the stream - it was obviously an emergency broadcast.

Zhora Albuov was in the screen without his usual colorful shirt: frightened, tensed, in a black T-shirt - he was staring intently at the tablet in front of him and talking at the same time.

- No one knows the reasons for what is happening. Apparently, Moscow has

been hit by a virus or something like that, but what this... thing is and how exactly it works, what the nature of its origin is - neither the authorities nor independent experts have an answer to this question.

Zhora paused, looked at his phone and continued:

- Olesya Gerasimenko of the "BBC" Russian service got through to presidential spokesman Peskov, here's what she just wrote on her Twitter feed: "Got through to Peskov. At first he was just shouting and then he said 'we're all going to die' and hung up. Fuck."

Alburov looked into the camera. Father Sergius shuddered; he was not used to seeing his favorite anchor in such a state. Zhora was pale, his lips trembling slightly.

- There's nothing in the official news yet, but if you believe the videos on social networks, the death toll in Moscow is already in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions....

Father Sergius unclenched his fingers and let the phone fall to the floor. A weird thought came to him - in the street, judging by what he had seen in the last few minutes, the end of the world was happening. The very one he had so often talked about in his sermons to the congregation. The very one he was supposed to have waited for and rejoiced in as signifying the imminent coming of the Savior. But Sergius did not rejoice. Marina and Valya were gone. Perhaps he had never believed? Maybe it was just a job? Maybe there was no God? Of course, he would find out soon enough.

Father Sergius took an axe from the storage room - for his last birthday, Mother had given him a set of carpentry tools, which he had intended to take with him to the dacha, but had never done so. At least it would come in handy now. Dragging the sharp axe on the long handle behind him, he went out to the stairwell. There were scary noises coming from the street, but it was relatively quiet and cool here in the entrance hall. He went through all the floors from top to bottom, methodically cutting the gas pipe that ran along the wall on each floor with an axe.

Once down on the first floor, he sat on the windowsill. Dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and a pair of sneakers, he sat next to a ficus tree that the concierge had planted on the windowsill. He sat and waited. Behind the ficus tree he found a half-empty pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

Father Sergius sniffed - it seemed that the concentration of gas in the hall was already high enough. He had never smoked in his life, so he was saving his health. Just before the terrible explosion had blown his body, along with the entire entrance and most of the house, into tiny pieces, he had thought, "For what? "

The newest subway train "Moscow 2020" holds a maximum of 1,490 people. Not "comfortably" accommodated, but exactly "packed in like sardines". This morning, the train, which also carried Mila Babochkina, an employee of the Darwin Museum, was almost completely full as it headed for the "Yugo-Zapadnaya" metro station. Maybe not all of the 1,490 people were on it, but there were certainly 1,460 passengers. Babochkina usually went to work via the "Akademicheskaya" station - it was faster and more convenient to walk to the museum from there, but today she was spending the

night at her boyfriend's place on "Park Pobedy", and it was more logical to go to work via "Universitet", having made a change from "Arbatskaya" to "Biblioteka Imeni Lenina". On the escalator she stood two steps above Veronica. When she heard the terrified scream of the bitten woman, Babochkina even thought about taking a video of "another crazy person in the metro" for her Instagram, but when she took out her phone, she realized that she was late and took a quick step up the escalator, taking the Mikhailin virus with her.

On the way between "Kropotkinskaya" and "Park Kultury" Babochkina began to cramp. Some of the passengers pressed the "passenger-driver" communication button, someone - this is Moscow - took out his cell phone and started filming. Three minutes after the virus had completely taken over Babochkina's body, the train was beyond saving.

The Moscow 2020 train has no doors or partitions between cars. About 100 of the 1,460 people on board were still alive after a few more stops.

The driver Mironov, who at first tried to ignore the strange noises coming from the car, decided to open the door and check, letting the infected passengers in. A dense wave of Muscovites poured into the narrow cabin, squeezing Mironov and overflowing through the windows into the tunnel. Someone hit a lever and the train accelerated. The train flew through the station and crashed into the next train at full speed. It didn't stop and dragged it further down the tunnel.

The same fate befell many other metro trains that day, which crashed into each other, derailed, and fell off metro bridges due to critical over-speed.

If the entry point of the Mikhailin virus into Moscow had not been one of the busiest stations of the Moscow metro, the city would have survived. It would probably have been possible to localize the infection, maybe sacrifice one of the infected districts, establish a quarantine... But a fatal coincidence of circumstances and a fatal bite of a mouse right at "Arbatskaya" made the death of the city inevitable.

Moscow was dying both slowly, desperately clinging to ghostly chances of salvation, and rapidly - the speed of the virus' spread left no chance.

Passengers infected on the escalator from "Arbatskaya" to "Biblioteka Imeni Lenina", "Alexandrovy Sad" and "Borovitskaya" carried the disease into trains and other metro stations.

Throughout the city, newly infected people came to offices, schools, kindergartens, shopping malls and cinemas, government offices and hospitals, churches and colleges.

In the first hours after the epidemic broke out, television was as usual silent or lied. There were no emergency broadcasts - only news about stability and peace in which the Russian state is at rest. But the Internet and radio began to report about the disease almost from the first minutes. Videos appeared. "Kommersant FM" and "Ekho Moskv", "Maximum" and "Nashe Radio", all the major online platforms - all of them were filled with messages about the terrible virus, about the many victims and, above all, about the urgent need to close doors and stay indoors.

Mikhail Albertovich, senior managing partner at the "Eidelman, Smirnov & Anisimov" law firm, heard about the virus on the "Silver Rain" radio when he went into

the kitchen to pour himself a cup of coffee. His secretary, Sofya, usually did that, but he couldn't reach her, and when he came out of his office, he saw that Sofya wasn't there. Neither were any of the other employees.

Not having finished listening to the message of the radio host, Mikhail Albertovich ran to his car. His wife Lena was at home, and she would handle it herself, but the children - Seryozha and Anfisa - were at school. Mikhail Albertovich himself had taken them to a private gymnasium in Sokolniki before going to the office. And now he ran to the car, repeating to himself:

"Just to be on time, just to be on time, just to be on time, just to be on time, just to be on time, just to be on time, just to be on time."

It was a relatively short drive. His nimble Hyundai Genesis gobbled up the kilometers on the way to school. Mikhail Albertovich drove on the sidewalk where the roads had been closed because of accidents. Sometimes he did not even slow down. At one corner, an infected person jumped under his wheels - he didn't hit the brakes. He seemed to remember how to breathe only when he stopped at the school fence. The gate was open.

Mikhail Albertovich had great sympathy for Volodya, the school guard. As far as one could say about a guard, Volodya was in some respects an intelligent man. He was polite and friendly to the children, and strict, though correct, with outsiders. Once Mikhail Albertovich saw Volodya knock out a drunken man who was trying to break into the school with one punch (as the director later explained, it was a bad divorce and the man was trying to take his daughter despite the court decision). After that incident, Mikhail Albertovich began to worry less about Seryozha and Anfisa - they were well protected at school.

Volodya was standing on all fours in front of the school gate and eating someone. Mikhail Albertovich was horrified when he recognized the class teacher lady from Seryozha's parallel class. Her rib cage was torn. Volodya was scooping up her insides with his huge paw and shoving them into his mouth. Mikhail Albertovich screamed. He realized that it was too late. He realized that nothing could be done about it. He ran screaming towards Volodya. The dead guard jumped up unnaturally fast - with his right hand he tore out Mikhail Albertovich's heart, and with his left hand he grabbed him by the throat, pulled him to himself and bit off his ear.

In front of the State Duma building, the young and already promising public activist Ekaterina Mizulina was surprised to see a group of people who seemed to be fighting at the "Okhotny Ryad" metro exit. Her driver also noticed them, got out of the car, and, holding the young Mizulina lightly by the shoulder, led her to the entrance of the State Duma.

If the Mikhailin virus could only be contracted after a bite, the Duma deputies might have survived that morning, but the virus was also transmitted by droplets in the air. And the correspondent of the "Parliamentary Hour" had already picked it up on the way to the meeting with Mizulina. Instead of greeting Mizulina, who arrived late, he sneezed blood on her. Insulted in the best feelings, Ekaterina hurried to hide in the

building while saying a few unpleasant words to the unlucky correspondent. By chance, or maybe it was fate, the first person she met in the Duma was Deputy Valuev.

If a random passer-by had looked into the building of the State Duma of the Russian Federation somewhere around 2:00 p.m., he would have seen that the meeting room was drenched in blood and littered with bodies and probably met Deputy Valuev, to whom the image of a terrible zombie suddenly fitted. Thanks to his background in sports, he was the only "survivor" and was now walking around the empty building on Okhotny Ryad in search of new victims.

In a way, it was a typical story. In the 1990s, the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer, in search of a cure for angina, accidentally invented Viagra. Almost thirty years later, the Institute headed by professor Mikhailin, in search of a cure for death, created the worst virus in history. Effective. Invincible. Deadly.

But for every Muscovite killed by the virus - whether revived by it or left lying on the ground - there were ten or even twenty killed by panic. Muscovites trampled each other in the metro, at train stations and airports, in the streets and in the alleys. Tens of thousands died in terrible stampedes...

In a matter of hours, the virus destroyed the city as an achievement of civilization. As a place where you could count on help, as a place where was hierarchy, law and order.

Out of habit, many citizens called ambulances at first, only helping the spread of the disease - failing to help the infected, the doctors got sick themselves and spread the disease further. The same thing happened to all the other emergency services in the city - firefighters and policemen. The latter tried to protect themselves and others, but no machine gun, much less a pistol, could handle the crowds of infected people.

Father Sergius was not the only one who decided that day to take as many of his neighbors as he could with him to the other world. In most cases, such suicides were done for humanitarian reasons - to save people from suffering and agonizing death. But whatever their motives, the result was hundreds, and soon thousands, of fires burning all over the city. And there was no one to put them out.

Actually, drivers were supposed to be the most protected group of Muscovites, but not everyone listened to the radio while driving. And when here and there infected people began to run out onto the streets, curious drivers began to open their doors and get out of their cars to see what was going on. The number of accidents began to grow exponentially. Literally three hours after the outbreak began, the city was stuck in a traffic jam the likes of which no one could remember.

The uniform was too tight, Tonya was in a bad mood, and on top of that, it was damn hot. The air conditioning had broken in the police van she and her partner were using to transport a prisoner for interrogation today. Tonya was sweltering.

She sat on an uncomfortable bench in the convoy compartment and stared at the prisoner. Actually, it was a strange thing to drive a car for just one prisoner - it was not usually done this way, particularly when it was necessary to take him for interrogation.