

THE IDEA

Foreword

The Great Dome

The administration building, broad-shouldered and tapering outwards from top to bottom - with a cuboid head formed by the winding gear housing of its huge central lift - was a veritable Colossus. After the failure of the Idea, the problem of what to do with it was the subject for debate for years after. On the one side of the debate stood the “Monumentalists” who argued that the building - all fifty floors of rain-streaked and sun-blached concrete - should stand as an eternal reminder of the *folly of ideology. This was an extreme position tempered by the opinions of the “moderate Monumentalists” who proposed that perhaps six or seven floors should be preserved - still visible for many kilometres on the plain outside the City - a combination of museum and cenotaph.

Their rivals, the “Demolitionists” wanted it razed to the ground and proposed that in its place, at the heart of the City, a garden should be laid out with four, possibly eight, paths imitating the rays of the sun, as a deliberate parody of the laser beams on its roof which had once transfixed the night sky along the eight major points of the compass as far as our forested horizons. Those garden paths would lead to a simple memorial. Its design would be decided by a statewide competition, promoted particularly in the schools as part of the inculcation of fresh values of tolerance and the abhorrence of dogma. But this view was not entirely uncontroversial.

“Yet again we will have children who will only know what to oppose” argued Vito Pejis, an old friend of mine and dogged advocate of the Idea. “But what will they be in favour of? Are we content to slide again into a hedonistic, incoherent, anti-social nihilism as happened before the ending of the Old Time and beginning of the Idea?” To my mind, he was unconsciously making a more telling point than he intended - that there is no permanent solution to the problem of the best way for men to live together - but his argument was swept away by the “winds of freedom” blowing around the City and the plains. Letters to the newspaper told him to rejoice that he had the right to express such an opinion and reminded him that any outspokenness years ago would have seen him in the Vault. I am already digressing, I know, but there is so much to tell and I hardly know where to start.

What *should* be done with the Dome? The idea of the garden did capture the public imagination. The Demolitionists sensed a great opportunity to win the debate and asked if we really wanted the Dome to dominate the City and plains until, dilapidated, it eventually collapsed. To this, the extreme Monumentalists made a strong counter-argument. How, asked Peza Obejis, one of their principals, did the Demols propose to take down the Great Dome? By dynamite? Block by block? How many years would it take and what would it cost? Who amongst us had the technical skills? After years without technology and expertise? Would we have to hire a company from abroad? Even if we could swallow such an elephant, would our adversaries be willing to co-operate? The Great Mentor would return to haunt us!

**(Lay the folly, dare I say, not in Man's idealism - or ideology - but in His weakness?)*

Explosives were of course out of the question. The whole centre of the City would be destroyed by falling masonry. It was an ancient engineer from an outlying district - survivor of the Purge of the Scientists - who came up with the brilliant solution. I kept the letter he wrote to the newspaper.

Fellows of the New State!

The Great Dome has a central lift capable of bearing many tons. Consider this to be a mouth and a gut. Volunteers working under my supervision could feed that gut from the top down, floor by floor and brick by brick, until all that is standing is the shaft. Working inside it with ropes and scaffolding - after the removal of the lift itself - the most dextrous workers could dismantle the empty shaft gradually, throwing the rubble down to the basement. I estimate that the Dome would have digested itself within two years.

Greno Valogis

This letter was broadcast on the radio, suggesting that it had gained high approval. Imagine the general astonishment when a referendum was announced. Voting had not taken place for many decades! The Demols went on to win by a huge majority after a near total turnout in City and Country. The slow disappearance of the Dome, top down, meant that people got used to the fact of its passing. It was only when it had finally gone - after three years and one month, without one life lost - that people wrote of their profound shock on waking some mornings and not seeing what had been central to their lives and the landscape. Those gardens I mentioned were laid out and eight walkways built converging to a very simple bronze circle laid in earth, inscribed with the words

LET US NEVER FORGET THOSE COUNTLESS FRIENDS
WHO DISAPPEARED HERE BELOW.

As I sat there in my wheelchair, old and broken long before my time, head bent and staring, the dark memories which I tried every morning to put under mental lock and key poured out and made me cry out in agony.

Now I must digress again and return to the beginning - my very beginning.

*

One of my most vivid early childhood memories was of riding out in Mother and Father's cyclocar, propelled by them sitting side by side, hand in hand, to view the Great Dome, recently completed, from the distant village where my maternal grandparents lived. There were hundreds of us there picnicking and as the twilight came down, the sudden laser beams, the silver spokes of a great wheel, burned an unforgettable image into my mind. I could not read the great banner draped across the top floor at that age - I was three, I think - and it was only in elementary school that I learnt that it said THE SIMPLE LIFE IS BEST. The name, Great Dome, did, however, even then strike me as odd because of its oblong, robotic appearance. I had a wooden model of it by my bed as every child did in those days.

How fervently I believed in the Idea! The many slogans and pictures of the Dome in infant school gave way in higher classes to more complex quotations from the works of the Mentor. One in particular, on the wall by my desk, which we had to learn by heart and chanting, said “The desire for ornamentation and goods demonstrates a weakness within, a superficiality and insufficiency of mind, causing a susceptibility to commercial propaganda.” I instinctively understood what this meant, and was never possessive of classroom toys and games. Another poster, drawn from the Mentor’s teachings, which we worked on together and illustrated, asserted

The rebels	can go
The self-abusers	are treated and helped
The anti-social	are re-educated

**But all who do not share our quest for a perfect society
can go to the borderlands!**

My teacher, Vena Yensis, had noticed that I was a natural sharer and held me up to the squabblers as an example. Yes, how fervently I believed! Dear, dear Vena Yensis - whom I last saw fleetingly in the Vault, a beautiful woman of forty plus reduced to a rag doll who did not recognize me when I called to her - inspired me in her history lessons when she spoke so eloquently of the evils of the Old Way. I can hear her now - as if I am still sitting at my desk, staring up in awe and love at her gentle face - speaking powerfully of those days of frenzy.

“Children. The people of the Old Time - many your parents - were slaves of what was called consumerism. They were conditioned - brainwashed and hypnotized - by commercial propaganda to be ever dissatisfied with their possessions - their quality and their number. *Ever better, ever newer, ever more* could have been their slogan. I shall never forget a frantic woman in a shop in a wine glass factory in Austria. We had seen a short film about glasses whose various shapes were said to be essential for maximising the aromas and flavours of various wines, and she was running - I do not exaggerate - *running* around the factory shop loading the entire range of glasses - many packs of six - into a trolley, her eyes filled with a mania, while her poor husband looked on and kept saying “What for? What for?” She was an addict, children, of acquiring things. Did she ever stare at the night sky, at beautiful flowers under the forest trees, at the birds on their branches? I doubt it. She was in a dark prison, a captive of impulses created outside of her and imposed on her mind by unscrupulous people.”

How we loved to laugh at her anecdotes about those ridiculous old ways! I remember once we drew pictures of mad people with many hands clutching many things and labelled them with our own slogans. ENOUGH IS ENOUGH was mine. Miss Vena singled it out for special praise. On my way home that afternoon I was ambushed by Helko Lensis and two others who accused me of going to bed with her - on the absurd grounds of my surname being the same as hers.

“Do you really want to own nothing?”

“Do you really only want an orange or nuts at the midwinter festival like our stupid ancestors had?”

They left me sobbing in a puddle.

If my digressions are annoying you, I am sorry. I must confess now that I did not

really wish to write this memoir but an interview with one of the new committees won me over.

“You were one of the most persuaded people. The “evangelist.” You are exactly the right one to tell the whole truth - do not be afraid to tell the whole, nasty truth of how the project turned sour. The public will believe *you*.”

“We need to exorcise these ghosts and ghouls and face facts. To cut out the cancer, we need you tell everyone how big and bad it was. Leave nothing behind or hidden. Show how it was connected to the healthy tissue and blood vessels.”

“It is precisely because of your convictions - and of your terrible suffering - that you are the ideal choice to write this history....and who knows, if ever the Great Idea returns to fashion, your account will stand as a warning about how not to implement it - or a warning not to implement it at all!”

I protested because I knew how good the Idea had been - (still was). But virtue cannot be imposed by cruelty or by reason on the stupid. Just as reason could not persuade Helko and his friends not to black my eye and loosen my tooth.

And so I let myself be convinced, weak as I was, to write this history, and one day Julia Polankis, such a dear young secretary, was brought to my bedside to take my dictation. It was she who gently chided me when my mind began to wander from its main task. So let the account proper begin.

The Surplus

Who would have dreamt that it would be years of good weather which would partly lead to the Downfall? After the collapse of the old, rotten system based on greed for goods - more accurately “bads” - the derelict towns had slowly been deserted. What could be produced there? What was there but anger and violence on the streets? And then, but only gradually, in the decade before I was born, the old factories and shops were demolished and the concrete wastelands and rotting housing blocks ripped up, allowing the captive earth to breathe for the first time in centuries. And that earth proved good. The people began to drift back in as order was restored, and, just as happened in ages long, long gone, from the rubble they built makeshift homes from where they could work the freed soil. They soon rediscovered their ingenuity and resourcefulness which had been suppressed by the devious propaganda of those sinister faceless ones for their own profit. The vast plains of black earth provided the staples we needed and the lush grass to fatten the livestock. The New Land produced the rest - carrots, beans, peas and all the other good vegetables in great plenty, as well as grapes and hops for wine and beer. Eventually, there was such a surplus that new brick silos were built and brick-lined pits dug to store it, for it was unthinkable to dispose of it as our ancestors had scandalously done in order to maintain prices at the same time that faraway (and some not so faraway) people were going hungry. The surplus would see us through the lean years, and, if a drought or famine affected other parts of the world, food could be shipped there from our only port as proof of our humanity and as an answer to the filthy propaganda of our enemies that we were isolationists and technophobes - worse - xenophobes.

Some could be traded with less hostile nations for the essential things we did not wish to manufacture - such as textiles and domestic appliances, with the strict proviso that they would not have obsolescence built in. We traded it for medicines and medical equipment, but as the population grew thinner and fitter due to healthy work and lifestyle, and as the obese elderly died out and cancer rates plummeted, the surplus increased as one temperate summer after another kept the land well watered and

warm. We could not build silos for ever. A scandal in the east where a commune had secretly traded a whole silo of grain for gadgetry for entertainment raised huge consternation, causing rooms in the cellars of the Dome to be opened up as temporary cells to hold the ringleaders until their re-education was complete; the beginning of the Vault.

The incident opened wide a debate which had simmered on for years and I found myself on a new committee of the brightest dedicated to finding solutions to the surplus problem. It had become so urgent that we were allowed to use a methodology which had previously been the province of those agencies responsible for commercial propaganda - that of brainstorming. We considered and rejected many things: to convert grain into strong alcohol would jeopardise our health; to export spirits would not be ethical. To consume more as food would lead us back to the old ways. To eat more and then burn more calories in extra exercise would be absurd. To encourage a growth in population would create, yes, more mouths to feed but also more hands to produce more food or hang idle. To convert the surplus into fuel would be equally pointless - to fuel *what*? To heat our homes in winter? Hot water was plentiful from solar energy and wind. Every "solution" was illogical or inimical to our ideals. I have read and reread the minutes from those committees and here is the record of a key one I have dramatised.

"There needs to be fewer of us producing" I said.

"But what will we do?" asked Luzo Gorkis of no-one in particular.

"There needs to be fewer of us!" I replied with a smile.

A silence ensued while all eyes studied me. I told them it was just a brainstormed joke but no-one laughed. I asked them if they had lost their sense of humour. Did we not have a wonderful surplus? Did not other countries view us and our rich plains with envy, and would they not invade us immediately, were it not for the laser defence? (The Mentor had advocated this non-aggressive system - it reached only as far as the border - as our last act of advanced technology.)

"There is no problem!" I cried, suddenly inspired and storming. "Plant more woodland...create more lakes and nature reserves. And if the surplus reduces to worrying levels, if the weather gets cooler or wetter, then bring that land back into production. Straightforward micromanagement!"

"Straightforward? I repeat, Mr Yensis. What would people do if they ceased working the land? If it is so straightforward, I must have missed something."

Gorkis held out his hands to invite me to reply. His lips smiled but not his pale blue eyes which always made me think of ice on a pond.

"What would they DO?" I exclaimed "Have more leisure!"

"And what would they do with their *more leisure*? Did not the devil ever make work for idle hands to do?"

To my dismay, I sensed the others giving silent approval to this pessimism. I looked at Andia but she gave me no encouragement.

"Idle hands? Can we not read, cycle, walk in the woods, swim in the lakes.....make love??"

Gorkis shook his head. No, many would turn their eyes abroad and look for novelty - like that aberrant commune in the east; dream of motor cars, holidays, films, electronics, games....television, a word he spat out as if it made his mouth sour.

"They must..." he concluded, leaning forward "...always be allocated tasks - any tasks - to occupy their minds.....sufficient to tire them out by evening."

I felt my cheeks flush with anger at his arrogance and distrust of people but took a

deep breath.

“Luzo...must we truly set up a sub-committee to advise people what they might do with their time? The people are content and in harmony again with the natural world.”

“Mr Yensis” he replied “Do we want the public infected by the virus of materialism again? By consumerist propaganda? The price of freedom from such ills is eternal vigilance!!”

He sat back to take credit for this slogan, as if it were his own and not stolen from that ancient American, Thomas Jefferson. History had been my specialism and I sensed the others did not know what I knew. Maliciously almost, I set my face in admiration. “What a clever - and original - thing to say, Luzo!”

I could not help but wink and he reddened, for he knew perfectly well what I knew.

He went to speak but nothing came out. So, disarmingly, I came to his rescue

“Luzo, Luzo, surely we can trust our friends and families to amuse themselves rationally, for they know only too well about the horrors of the Old Time. Or are you implying that our history syllabus and the teaching methodology laid down by the Mentor are.....*flawed?*?”

He flinched. I had scored a point against that terrible Jeremiah!

*

“Neno, you really must be careful what you say in committee,” said Andia as she rolled over onto her side of the bed. “Gorkis does not like you; he does not like you because you are cleverer; he doesn’t like you because you defeat him in argument and make him look foolish. Never forget who he is! Whose nephew.”

I had wanted to ask her why she had not spoken up for me when she knew I was right, but the nephew argument told me the answer. Gorkis’s uncle was no other than the current Chief Coordinator.

“Andia, come. The Chief Co is not a petty man. Our committee is *expected* to explore all ideas - no matter how outlandish. I am surely not the only one of us around the table who cannot accept that people are so vulnerable to corruption. What have the last forty years been about if they are? The people are safe! How can the people watch the television broadcasts of our enemies without receivers? How can they listen to their radio propaganda? Even if the jammers failed, would they *want* to? This is the land of milk and honey and of plenty, plenty, plenty.....too much plenty!. Why would they trade in such freedom to be a wage slave and slave to consumerism? Gorkis is wrong not to trust the people. We have no money - how would we buy foreign trash? With sprouts and carrots? Gorkis is a fool.”

I got up and looked out at the vast spaces beyond the city, at the villages, the fields and moon-silvered lakes and the black woodlands under the stars stretching on for miles and miles. How I loved what I saw! The dereliction in old photographs had all vanished. From my apartment on the thirtieth floor of the Dome I was gazing on Paradise. I went out onto my balcony where I grew my own lemons, peppers and tomatoes and where we barbecued delicious trout on sunny evenings and made love. The streets below were dark and quiet. Tomorrow promised to be another glorious June day and the city people would stroll out to collect their supplies and later sit in their gardens to grill and chat over a glass or two of wine. There would be thousands out in the great parks jogging and picnicking. Thousands more would be at the open air swimming pools which had heated domes should it turn cool or turn to rain. There were libraries, galleries, exhibitions and gymnasia. Who could want for more, when everything was free? The Romans had diverted their plebeians with cruel circuses, but

we were better. What a pessimist Gorkis was! To be in company with one's friends, neighbours and relatives without the shadow of compulsory labour looming over the evening was enough to make most people content. And was there not ample precedent for this in the lifestyle of the primitive tribes of the ancient forests? Had any wondered out onto the savannah *in pursuit* of cheap shirts, tequila and gadgets - until they were dangled under their bone-pierced noses?? Yes, the surplus was a problem, but we had the intelligence to manage it. For one thing, it ensured that there was no theft or envy. The Ancients had had surpluses too, creating leisure in which they could relax and speculate on the secrets of existence, science and mathematics. Were we not on the verge - even in the midst - of such a golden age, but without the curse of slavery - and the curse of the horse-mounted raiders whom their surpluses had attracted? We had no thieves and no slaves, only the volunteers who wished to serve their fellows in all essential services, in committees, the fields, the hospitals, schools, universities - where now true learning took place - food outlets, museums, pools etc, etc - and there were long waiting lists of those volunteers!

As I admired the clear sky sketched with starry diagrams, a daring thought came to me. It made me laugh out loud to imagine Gorkis's incredulous face to hear it in the next committee. But were not all and any thoughts permitted there??

"What is funny, Neno?"

I went back to her in bed and began to tell her, watching her grey eyes grow wider and wider as the idea penetrated her brain. She sat straight up and looked down at me, sweeping her black hair behind her left ear as she always did when agitated.

"Can you be serious? You would advocate giving the surplus away - to our enemies? What would our people think - to watch the fruits of their labours go across the border to those who hate us? And would they even accept such gifts?"

"It could sweeten relations between us."

"No! It would undermine their politics of competition and greed. It would be seen as an act not of generosity but of subversion. A crazy notion. Do you wish to set the whole committee against you - even more than they already are?"

"Who knows - it might fire off other ideas...as when Archimedes decided to take a bath. *We* have wonderful sex - and *I* think of this -"

"Stop it!"

She jumped out of bed and stood there in her all naked beauty, tears in her eyes.

"You do not care for me! You are too....too trusting. This will all turn out very bad."

At the next meeting I said nothing and Andia soon ceased to glower at me. It was agreed that we would build more silos and convert some old property in a former industrial area of the city for extra storage. Borna Bjenkis came up with the stunning idea of taking hundreds of acres of New Land out of vegetable production to grow flowers to adorn the streets of the city and villages. Yet I did not doubt that the grain surplus would continue to grow, and I silently prayed for a bad summer or two. We were a balancing act more or less in equilibrium that year and I had it put in the minutes that I felt there was no sign yet of a tipping point. As we packed away our papers I went to speak to Gorkis, but he gave me the curtest of nods and turned his back on me.

*

One July morning not long afterwards, it was Andia's birthday, and as her treat she

said she wanted to ride out into the old forest - not the new - almost as far as the Outlands near the villages of Zendau and Kronau where she had grown up. She longed to find again a secret pool under a great oak from which she and her friends had hung a rope swing. We could take a picnic and wine. And make love.

So we mounted our new cyclocar and pedalled out slowly side-by-side from the cheery bustle of the city. Heading west, we passed many a cyclotrain of carts headed by a score or more of pedallers taking flour to one of the main bakeries. Others were bringing in consignments of vegetables, fruits, animals, honey and mead, beer and wine - and each group waved and chorused a greeting, looking forward no doubt to the lavish hospitality provided by volunteers at their destination. My sister Hela was a member of a Logistics committee which convened on an upper floor of the Dome from where she loved to watch through binoculars all the drays and carts being delivered and marshalled into cyclotrains.

We headed farther and farther from the city, past the village of Pernau where my parents lived, having inherited my grandparents' house, until even the Dome was a hazy blur behind us. The forest loomed ever larger until we saw nothing but trees from which crows rose like cinders, black against blue, then fell back. We had cycled beyond all the settlements, gardens and fields dotted with tillers and hoers who paused to watch us pass, until there was an absolute silence which even the crows respected. It was early afternoon when the track finally ended in a glade. We left our machine and walked between tall ferns drawn on by the murmur of water. Andia grew more excited as we came closer to her childhood haunt and she took the lead along the narrow path. How eagerly I anticipated our lovemaking. How agile, slender and sturdy she was, how lovely her dark tanned skin as she ducked beneath the branches and brambles - an image of her I can never forget of our last days together.

At a giant pine tree on which an old heart was carved, she left the path and scrambled through the grass and plants and pointed to a crag from which leapt a spout of water through a rainbow of moisture. She led me into a clearing, a sunlit paradise in miniature, and at the point where the tumbling stream landed, we watched silver ripples spreading out through the reflected blue sky. Breathlessly I asked her if she was sure we would be quite safe and alone there as she pulled off her clothes and pressed her warm body against me. For answer she hauled me down onto my knees and we made passionate love watched only by the sun.

As soon as she had fallen silent I told her that I had never felt so content. As we lay in each other's embrace looking at the flawless sky in that silence I asked her to imagine we were the First People with no other part to play in life but to love and sustain each other from the fruits around us. She told me to treasure the moment for a time of suffering. It was a strange thing to say and I asked her to explain. She had, she said, meant nothing specific by it - only that suffering was inevitable.

"You seem so pessimistic sometimes, Andia. While I always look on the bright side. Come on, it's your special day!"

I stroked her back and with my finger traced *I love you* on her skin. But she did not laugh as she usually did.

"I did not mean to be depressing, Neno. Let us bathe now - I am brimming over with you."

When we had bathed in the chilly pool we scrambled onto the bank and ate our picnic, letting the hot sun dry our bodies. But she became preoccupied and even sullen. I asked after a while if I had not pleased her. Of course I had! Her voice failed and she closed her eyes. I waited. Finally she sobbed and said that she had something to confess. I put down my glass and it fell over. The luscious silver-green wine vanished

amongst the moss.

“Have you taken another lover?”

Very emphatically she shook her head and took my hand.

“Then what?”

Eventually she said “I have been spying on you. I was transferred to the committee when Loikis died to keep watch on your movements.”

Almost in shock I stood up and put on my clothes. The silence of the woods mirrored the speechlessness of one - me - who was never lost for words. Nothing stirred, not a leaf, not a blade of grass. She began to tell me her secret.

A man - a handsome man with a red eyelid - had come to her flat the previous autumn to give her an important assignment, showing her special credentials which she had believed. Her project was to befriend me in committee and to become, if possible, my lover. A Guardian called Loikis had fallen or jumped from the window of his flat and she had been nominated as his replacement. At first she had refused to cooperate but had been persuaded by blackmail; her father had the shaking disease and needed expensive drugs from abroad which might be suspended if she would not cooperate in full. This story did more than dumbfound me. In a few minutes my world, my faith and my optimism were sent reeling.

“But why? Did this man give a reason for suspecting me?”

“No. He left me a phone number and I had to report on you weekly - what you said in private and who you met. It must come from the Chief Co’s nephew - or the main man himself. But you know why. You are too optimistic, too good to be true...too convinced. They criticize you behind your back and expect me to join in. And your mother was English. You might in fact be a traitor, an agent of the Opposition. You are naïve, arrogant, too clever for your own good, impetuous and too trusting - and my mistake was to fall in with love you. But that is not all I must confess. I *did* betray you.”

“What? How?”

“The police official would not believe that you did nothing suspicious. He accused me of becoming your accomplice and threatened to have Father’s treatment halted anyway. I had to give him something, Neno, please try to understand. So I said you once had a visitor - a man - to whom I thought you spoke in English - a language which of course I did not understand. Then I was unable to give a convincing description of the man. Now he thinks I am lying and *am* part of your conspiracy.”

“Andia, dearest Andia, how could you be so stupid, a woman of your intelligence? I can scarcely believe what I am hearing. When was this?”

“A week before the early June committee - when you joked about there being too many of us. Gorkis made a private note - did you not see? But I resent you speaking of *me* being stupid! You are acknowledged to be of the brightest on the committees - and yet you jeopardise your future by provocative and immature remarks. Think before you speak.....*too many people*why did Gorkis write it down? You cause yourself to be suspected....and now I am sure I am under suspicion too - that is why I wanted to get away today from the Dome.”

I searched for a response, words of comfort and reassurance but I only felt great anger - not at Andia but at Gorkis and whoever else wished to unseat me from the committee.

“But there is no opposition!” I shouted at the trees “This is paranoia on Gorkis’s part. He is jealous of me and thinks I wish to undermine him. This is exactly how the tyrant Stalin perverted the *Russian* revolution! I will challenge Gorkis in committee to produce evidence against me. And you will openly admit you lied about the

Englishman.”

“Then I will be accused of betraying my duty. My father will suffer, even die...*no, no...*”

“Be calm, Andia. Listen. This is what you must do. I want you to tell the agent my new idea of donating the surpluses to our adversaries.”

“Are you completely mad?”

“No - it will protect you, because - no listen - at the very next committee I will declare the idea and it will be recorded. That will confirm the truth of your story. Then I will write directly to the Chief Co.”

“The idea would confirm you as a traitor! To give away our produce to those who hate our way of life? You must not say it for my sake - and for yours. I will tell the agent that I was mistaken about the Englishman. That it was a friend from university..... with whom you enjoy speaking Latin - or Greek.”

“Another lie. Can you not see that a second lie does not cancel out the first - but makes it all the worse when the second is exposed?”

“Shush! Listen!”

For a while there was nothing and I began to think she had imagined the noise due to the state she was in. Then I heard it - not a crow as I had first supposed, but a faraway peal of laughter - and my immediate thought was that we had been followed. Spies laughing out loud, however, made no sense - and the noise was getting no nearer. Andia dressed quickly. The laughter had come from the direction of the spot where we had left the carriage. We were creeping along the path when, to our left, in a glade illuminated by a shaft of sun, I saw something gleam bright. I trampled through the bracken and picked it up. It was warm. I was shocked.

“What have you got?” called Andia. I took it back and showed her. It was an empty bottle of foreign spirits.

“But how,” she gasped “Did it get here?”

I looked around again for an explanation and further along at the edge of the path something red caught my eye. It was an empty box with Marlboro written on it.

“Cigarettes?” she exclaimed. “But from where?”

We were twenty kilometres from the far edge of the Outlands and thirty from the border. As we stared into the forest, there came peals of laughter again, a mixture of voices quite close. A thin twirl of smoke was rising. We began to creep towards it and soon heard music, not from an instrument, but from a device of some kind. My first thought was that foreigners had come across the border undetected, but no, the voices were speaking our language. Drunkenly. The breeze wafted over a delicious smell of grilled meat. I counted five men and three women. There was a half-fallen log near to us and we crouched behind it to watch and listen. They were smoking and passing another bottle of liquor from mouth to mouth.

“I have an idea,” whispered Andia “If you report this to the Public Health and Safety Committee and show them the bottle, it will completely wreck Gorkis’s campaign against you. You will put yourself beyond suspicion.....Come on....”

We stood but could go no farther. Blocking our path was a huge middle-aged man, who belched spirit into our faces and then yelled - *snoopers* - bringing two younger men running, one staggering.

“City slickers!” roared the giant, pushing me onto the floor. A young woman tightened the bark strips on our wrists and ankles. Andia was silently weeping. She had wet herself and was acutely embarrassed. An older woman leered into her face and shouted barely comprehensible abuse. “Why can’t you stay in your own end -

‘stead o’ spugging on us!’

I pleaded for a hearing; told them we had had a picnic in the woods and pointed at our basket with its litter and dirty plates; begged them to believe we were spying on nobody.

“We have absolutely no intention or reason to land you in trouble!”

One of the men cuffed my ear for this and shoved his hand into my jacket pocket.

There he found my credentials which I had foolishly brought with me. Slowly he read out loud *Neno Yensis - Agrarian Planning Surplus Committee 2 - Alpha Plus* - and then shouted “Good God! He’s an important man - intelligents-s-ia!”

They all went into a huddle some way away from us and Andia sobbed.

“Oh no - they’re discussing our fate. They know they have to kill us now they know what you are.”

I shouted that they should let the girl go - that I had met her in Kronau and asked her to share my picnic in the forest - that she was as ordinary as they were.

“Be silent, committee bug! She has seen our faces. She stays.”

The giant took another bottle from a case and swigged more liquor. It was time for me to try another tack before he got so hopelessly drunk that no argument would work.

“If you are addicted to this foreign poison, I will ensure that you got the very best treatment in the detoxication unit. It affects good judgment and humane behaviour, and it -”

He had begun to rush towards me with a branch he had picked up and only stopped dead at the last moment.

“So, you took a simple girl - one of ours - into the woods to ravish her! Did she have a nice sweet plum, committee bug? Did she sing you a nice loud song - or pretend to, just to please you? Detoxication? You dare say this word to me? My brother, Briso, he volunteered for this in the city last year and has been in the Vault of your accursed Dome ever since. Here! Why don’t you try a proper drink, Mr Saintly Alpha Plus! Taste!”

He shook the bottle at me and the spirit burned my lips. I spat it away in disgust, making them all laugh helplessly. Determined not to show fear, I asked them how they managed to get hold of it. He turned to the others and called me a nosy spy.

Then, as he raised the branch again to strike me, he thought better of it and slowly asked a question which turned my insides to ice - *Well.....what harm would it do for the spy to know the truth now?*

The older woman - I thought his wife - intervened and told him not to be so stupid but he brushed her aside. He really wanted to tell me: that for consignments of vegetables, peaches and grapes, they received cigarettes and cognac. Did we really think in our high-and-mighty Dome that plains people were content just to shovel shit and dig up potatoes?

“You are not the only ones who can store things away! You’re not the only ones who can bring in illegals when it gets dark! You bribe the border guards with bottles too - they told me. The Chief Co and his holy committees - hypocrites - you all make me sick preaching to everyone while doing what you preach against!”

He took a great swig and spat it all over my face, taking my breath away. Andia groaned and sobbed.

“You mean to kill us,” she screamed. “We vow - we will not say one word. I am twenty-three this very day. He is twenty-eight. We are not hypocrites. We don’t care what you do. We take no strong drink - and when you are sober you will be sorry.”

This seemed to have some affect on him and he slowly turned away. The youngest woman by the fire, a strikingly beautiful girl, shouted that the meat would spoil.

They crouched down to eat from their spits and carried on drinking and laughing, making crude and rude references to us much of the time. The sun did not take long to leave the woods and the campfire grew brighter in its place. Slowly too that began to fade and with it the laughter and conversation until there was only silence and the sound of Andia breathing.

Fingers were touching my ankles as I woke, so I kicked out. A voice in my ear - a young voice, the voice of the cook? - told me to be still. The night was moonless and starless. The quick hands were now struggling with the bark on my wrists. And then I was free.

“You promised not to tell on us, Mister. My dad meant no harm - he drinks too much and throws his weight around. Untie your tart and go.”

We crept away from the embers of the fire, struggling through undergrowth until a break in the dense treetops revealed a laser beam from the Dome. We followed it until a pale glow in the sky showed us where the east was. We came on the trail and found our cyclocar.

Against the sunrise, the distant and tiny Dome was dark. For my whole life it had been a symbol of protection and guarantor of the Idea. With a shudder of horror I saw it now as a sinister intruder into my life.

*

I was a tooth in one of many cogs, each cog turning or being turned by a neighbour until the cog at the very top was itself in motion, the golden cog of the Co-ordinating Committee. All the good work of those below registered itself there, and there the best ideas were fine-tuned and then implemented. Every tooth in every cog would get its chance to rise and rise and rise and have the honour of serving at the highest level. In this manner, in a system ingeniously designed by the Mentor himself - he who having no wish for personal glory, had, by example, omitted his name from his philosophic masterpiece on good governance - it was guaranteed that only experience and wisdom would guide decision-making. (It was comic that in many lands before the Collapse, men of thirty and forty had exercised great power!) Every Chief Coordinator would rise and rise and then serve only one year before retiring from the High Committee which always counted eleven members. The C C would encourage, advise, consult, recommend but only ever had the right to vote when the members split five against five. Thus, his or her power was limited by the power of the rest and by the short duration of service. It was an exquisite machine. Only a serious, formal objection made and sustained by majority vote at a lower committee could prevent one from rising. Was I now to miss out on my life's ambition to be the Coordinator because of the petty jealousy and absurd suspicions of Gorkis? Such conduct itself was unstatutory and open to censure. If it could be proven that he had somehow induced an official to blackmail Andia, then he would be subject to that very objection - and possible expulsion, even exile - which he seemed to desire to be my fate. But would he be acting alone? Had the perfect, exquisite machinery produced a Chief Co - his uncle Mero Gorkis - who was corrupt? Was the whole system corrupt? Unthinkable! Had the giant in the woods not been totally drunk? But as I looked out later that dreadful day towards the ancient woods from my window I could not help but see everything with a new eye, an eye of revelation. In all those settlements, copses and fields I feared corruption. My attempts to persuade myself that our

experience was exceptional proved difficult. That gigantic man had seemed to be of an unanswerable cynical conviction which transcended his drunkenness. Coming immediately after Andia's confession, his allegations against the Chief Co had the ring of truth. My old certainties were violated, perhaps beyond redemption.

I turned away from the window to look at Andia sitting in a frozen silence in an armchair, with her knees drawn up under her chin. She was traumatised and refused to be comforted. I suggested going for a walk in the park, for a swim, to a gallery - anything to distract ourselves - but every suggestion drew only a shake of her head. I even had the feeling that she even held me in some measure responsible for what had befallen us.

While she slept, I cooked her her favourite meal - goulash with parsley potatoes, putting all the loving care I could muster into it. I woke her with a glass of red wine and after a hesitation she took it. The wine and smell of the food revived her spirits and I was glad. That long evening we drank quite a lot and debated well into the night what would be the best course of action. The next day the committee would meet and it was vital to devise a plan to preempt Gorkis and get ourselves off the hook. I agreed not to mention my idea of donating the surpluses, and in the end we decided not to mention the drunken party, only that we had found German brandy and American cigarettes. The identity of the nine individuals involved, though Antisocials, was of little importance compared to the crime - and we had given a promise to the girl - under duress admittedly - not to inform on them. I knew the name of the giant's brother - Briso - which he had stupidly revealed to us, and an enquiry made to the committee which oversaw re-education and remediation could soon establish a link to him, should it become necessary to identify the giant. No, we decided we would go no further than raise the alarm about illegal trade and so repair my reputation in committee. After much persuasion and wine Andia agreed to declare that she had been blackmailed by an official into spying on me. This would lead to a special investigation by one of the Vigilance Committees and, if Andia could identify the man with the red eyelid from photographs and have him detained, then he might confess who - and I had little doubt who it was - who had put him up to it.

It was after we had made love and I was about to fall asleep that something else jolted me fully awake. The thought of Briso. Had he really never re-emerged from detoxication and remediation as his brother had asserted? Perhaps this was as wild an allegation as his slandering of the Chief Co. Was it not absurd - the very idea that Mero Gorkis himself would be involved in illegal trading across the border? - and how could the giant know of what went on the east of the capital where the Chief Co, like all his predecessors, lived in seclusion, out of the reach of those who might seek favour? Beyond the forest there was only the great lake and the closed island of Bakeria - who was there to swap the surplus with in the desert beyond? Was Briso still a prisoner in the Vault - or had he been exiled to Bakeria? I decided I would need to find out in order to put my mind to rest. But that night those questions kept posing themselves like an ever repeating tune and I could not sleep....

The Investigation

Gorkis, centre of attention, forehead gleaming with perspiration, removed his watch as usual and laid it flat on the table before rubbing his wrist where there were the first signs of his flaking skin disease which he tried to hide beneath long-sleeved shirts. He was the senior committee member and would rise at the end of the year, to Logistics

D where my sister Hela served. Then it would be my turn to preside here. Once minutes of the previous meeting had been read, I craved the attention of the others, saying I had a serious matter to report, and rose to address them. Occasionally I tried to catch Andia's eye but she, looking ill and weary, kept her gaze low. When I had finished I sat down and watched the pencil in the slender fingers of our young secretary Dola - a very sweet girl of nineteen - catch up with my closing remarks. Gorkis rose and ambled to the wide window which looked north to the mountains. He deliberately delayed speaking in order to dramatize himself further. How his self-regard disgusted me! The constitution was designed to eliminate favouritism, nepotism, the formation of cliques and the cult of personality - but it could not eliminate egotism. Finally he deigned to speak: "That is a remarkable story, Mr Yensis. Naturally, you have brought back the bottle and the packet with you as evidence?"

This unexpected remark induced a kind of panic. Forced to say something, I could only splutter and stop, causing the others to stare at once in wonder at me - the silver-tongued one who was never lost for a word. Gorkis had retaken his seat at the head of the long table opposite me. I looked to Andia for assistance but she had closed her eyes.

Gorkis saw his chance and seized it greedily.

"I'm sorry, Mr Yensis, but are we to understand that you have not brought back vital evidence of illegal trade to give to the police? What if suspects are arrested - how can it be proven? Did you leave the bottle in situ?"

"Yes."

Rosima Solcis - an Alpha in ecology and normally my ally - almost cried out in pain. Had we taken leave of our senses? Leaving glass amongst dry bracken in such a summer?

I felt hot and ridiculous. Again, I looked at Andia and pleaded with my eyes to say something. Without looking up, she muttered that we had buried the bottle.

"It smelt bad" she added. "I did not want it in my picnic basket or near me. It was my birthday. It was my favourite woodland where I played as a child. *Of course* we wished to prevent a fire!"

This seemed to satisfy Rosima, but Gorkis sensed it was a lie.

"That bottle, Miss Tugis, is evidence. It will have to be retrieved. You will no doubt be able to show the police the exact spot in your favourite woods. Where you *so* responsibly buried it."

Andia refused the invitation to speak, so I began to give a brief description of the location, near Zendau, watching that pencil in those lovely fingers recording Gorkis's sarcastic remark - a shorthand squiggle which I saw, with growing dismay, as another strand in a web binding us tighter. I was searching desperately how to continue the lie but now Andia - always resentful to be called by a surname whose ugliness she hated, and bated by Gorkis whose trout face she hated as much - belatedly reacted and completely sealed us in.

"How dare you, Gorkis, question my integrity with that snide tone? It is you who are devious and dishonest! Who sent the security officer - the man with the red eye - to force me to spy on Neno - because he is jealous of his looks, his physique, his logical mind? Who hates him enough to do so - because he always beats him hands down in argument? Who?"

She began to sob and then ran out leaving the room to a shocked silence. As papers were shuffled in embarrassment, the pencil scurried on, seeming to whisper *disaster* before halting with an emphatic full stop. It was awful that a girl as pretty and sweet

as Dola - a girl who I knew admired me – might well be a dispassionate instrument in my demise. Now, instead of dominating the moral high ground I found myself crouching in a shabby corner. What a catastrophe!

A motion of censure against me was proposed and seconded by allies of Gorkis and passed unanimously while he studied his stupid watch. Only when he directed me to leave the meeting did he glance up with a glint of triumph in his wet fish-eyes.

What on earth had possessed her, I whispered to Andia as the great lift took us down, to make such an outburst? She hissed back at me like an angry swan, turning heads.

“Because you wanted me to...”

“Yes, but couldn’t you see it was the wrong time and the wrong way?”

Now her anger really boiled up and she yelled “Oh you! Only you know the right time and the right way! Well you looked pretty stupid *without* any help from me!”

Mercifully the lift was at our floor and we got off with all eyes, I felt, piercing our backs. Back in my flat she really let fly, when, in an effort at reconciliation, I lamented our bad luck and deplored how Gorkis had such an inexplicable grip on the committee. I had not thought the problem of the bottle through, she screamed, and when I retorted stupidly that neither has she, she became so angry that I had to restrain her. While I held her tightly around the shoulders her breathing slowed and I thought her anger had relented too; but it had only turned freezing cold.

“It is not that Gorkis controls the committee, you fool.” She broke free and went to the window. “Many dislike him as much as I. But they dislike you more! Your zeal means that you entertain no doubts. We others believe up to a point but you seem such a saint, a devotee, such a fanatical...archangel of the Idea, You are so remote that you do not even know your nickname.”

“My nickname? I have a nickname?”

“The evangelist.”

“But that...is.....absurd! I try to persuade no-one. Who, I ask, needs persuading?”

She laughed but not pleasantly. If I had not been so damned nosy in the first place, she said, if we had just walked away and left the bottle where it was, none of this would have happened.

“But no. You insist on being the moral guardian of the people! The policeman of the Idea!”

I went to embrace her but she was rigid in her contempt. When I asked her if she had really heard whispers of dissent, discontent even, she nodded. She told me that I would hear them too if I were trusted. I asked her why people were discontent and, as she began to enlighten me, I looked out onto the far plains golden with wheat and the dark forests beyond, feeling suddenly very sad for them; that they were, apparently, not loved as much as I thought they were.

“Things, Neno. People want more things. A few things to call their own. A woman my cousin knows has things smuggled from abroad which she shows privately to close friends. She has foreign clothes to put on and is envied for them and feels special. People need to feel *special*. Some want more variety of entertainment...you heard their music in the forest played on the machine.”

“But were those oafs typical? The good people have their radio, their newspaper, their concerts.....their leisure domes - they do not seem unhappy to me!”

Andia closed her eyes and shook her head in a kind of despair.

“*Their* concerts? They are not theirs! They do not own them. They have to depend on the radio to hear music they like.”

I challenged her to explain how these feelings, if real, were being conceived and

fostered without commercial propaganda. She would not speak and I took her silence as a cue to remind her of what we had all been taught at school.

“The theories of the Mentor show clearly -”

“You and those damned theories! Think for yourself! People are no less greedy or vain because of what an old man wrote decades ago! People want more, people want different, people want special. Theories do not alter how people basically *are*.”

“Andia, you astonish me. If you spoke like this in public, you would be reported. Of course, there is aberrance but never on the scale which you are asserting. The aberrants - like that alcoholic’s brother - are treated in the Vault. I have met them - before *and* after...”

I told her she was exaggerating because she was still in shock and suggested we dine out that night in The Gardens. Things would look better after a pleasant evening. But no, she muttered that she needed to be alone for a time to think things over. She was scared her attack on Gorkis would rebound on her father. She took a deep breath and told me she was going back to her own flat until the storm blew over. She began to gather her things together, even the treasured duck she had modelled as an infant, and, not sure how to take her leave she forced her mouth - but not her eyes - to smile and left. Young love is a fragile creature. I sensed that ours, like her childish duck, had lost a wing.

That first lonely evening I unearthed and took comfort in an essay I had written as part of my examination when a student. I scanned through and found my favourite sections

Commercial propaganda created and sharpened the urge to consume while bank credit created the means, opening wide the pitfall of debt. The job was also part of the trap. Wages were essential and the salary-slave was forced to conform and obey in order to receive them, but they were never sufficient to still the craving for more clothes, more gadgets, more distraction, and they never sufficed to stoke the furnaces of production and consumption. How debt made those furnaces roar and glow! In parallel, the media limited and trivialised what people thought about, inventing icons to envy and enemies to fear - scroungers at home, scroungers from abroad. In addition to this foul recipe, school curricula did not educate children in philosophy, music and the humanities, but, giving them as much literacy, numeracy and technology as necessary, trained them for the jobs market and the career ladder. Their young minds also were conditioned from the earliest age to consume and to go into debt. No obvious hands pulled the levers of this conspiracy but everything locked neatly together to create the gaudy walls of a prison. And then when the banks, after tottering for years, finally failed, the whole rotten structure collapsed in a mayhem of civil war, international conflict and famine.

The corrupt old regime here, of the tyrant Regino Kankris, had finally been swept away on a tide of popular revulsion, an uprising of desperate people who had nothing to lose or to fear. When the army refused to fire any longer on rebels and protesters, the hour of Kankris and his cronies had come and they fled across the border. But there were sceptical voices sounding warnings in the vacuum of power - who amongst the architects, doctors and teachers who had taken to the streets was fit to govern? Without a brand new politics would it not be inevitable that ambitious, greedy men would rise once more to power? General Jorkis, a great and wise soldier, took control of the chaos and fostered debate; out of this good foment a book emerged,

The New Idea, by an anonymous author. The basic theory was childishly simple: return the land to the people and the people to the land; reskill them; make rich again their impoverished lives - and virtue and sanity - both personal and social - would return. Jorkis was enthused by these ideas and the popular acclaim they received. Under his kind and watchful eye the Dome was built and the committee system initiated.....

On reading it through again, I found to my dismay that it had acquired, as all histories do, an air of staleness, a patina of irrelevance.

The next morning I would be arrested.

*

By early post that Tuesday I had received a letter signed by all committee members to inform me that I was suspended *sine die* from meetings until “certain matters” were resolved. I was not surprised, for this was usual procedure. I only imagined Dola’s slender fingers on the keys of the machine and wondered how sorry she had felt to type it. I ran down the two flights of stairs to the floor where Andia’s flat was and knocked on the door, anxious to know whether she had received such a letter too. There was no response to my knock, and of all the reasons for her lack of answer I chose to believe that she was still asleep at that hour. I returned to my flat and put on shorts and a thin shirt. It was still cool and ideal for a tension-relieving jog in the Central Park.

My arrest was not dramatic, not unpleasant. In fact, looking way back from this bed to that life-changing second - one in billions of no consequence - it now seems almost absurd how casual, how *polite* it was. The two officers showed me their cards and one, the older one, smiled. She reminded me of my Auntie Dena. She said it was not yet a criminal matter as no proof of a misdemeanor had been made - only an allegation. The *not yet* stabbed me like an icicle and I snatched a deep breath. “An allegation by Gorkis??”

They said nothing to this, as if they had not heard, and only stood back into the corridor to invite me to join them. The younger officer was unusually attractive with her bronze-blond hair tied back, and it made me smile that she was making such an effort to keep a deadpan expression in eyes which, I supposed, would not hesitate to exploit their dazzling beauty, were they looking up from a towel on a sunny day at the main Lido. The women were in green uniform and I was between them in red shorts, and it looked as if I had been pulled up for jogging in the corridor, an activity which had been banned.

We descended by lift into the Vault and after an interminable walk along a passage where I had never been, they invited me to enter a small room - number 121, I remember - before turning and going back the way they had come. An interrogator in a blue collarless jacket, quite an old man, invited me to take a seat. He smiled at my attire and apologized if my plans had been interfered with. On the table was a ring binder containing a few sheets. I saw my name upside down at the top of one. He saw me looking and placed his hand over it. This also made me feel icy cold - as if ownership of my own fate was slipping away. The friendly cast of his features made the feeling worse. Was it meant to? He studied me as if for clues to my state of mind and announced that he would come straight to the point: an allegation had been made as to my involvement with illegal trade. This made me gasp with amazement,

indignation - and horror. Had Gorkis been present then, I am certain I would have struck him. I declared to the official that I utterly rejected and deplored such an allegation - especially as it came from a colleague - Luzo Gorkis - who knew perfectly well my strong disapproval of such offences. The official held out his palm almost as a father would do to calm an angry child. He told me that he had never met Mr Gorkis - although, of course, he knew of him. He opened a drawer, took out and placed my ID card in front of me. There was a greasy smear across my nose and cheek like a lopsided moustache which made my earnest stare look ridiculous. "This was found by the police in Zendau, a village in the Outlands near the Old Forest. They had been called to a domestic incident - a drunken smallholder, one Vendo Salkis, was assaulting his wife and daughter because he thought they had betrayed him. The smell on his breath led to a store of German brandy being discovered in an outbuilding."

My mind worked quickly; I expressed relief that the card had been found. So I *had* dropped it in the forest after all. I added that I had turned my flat upside down searching for it, dreading the embarrassment of having to apply - a second time in a year - for a new card. Suddenly he interrupted me.

"Please, Mr Yensis - have the courtesy and respect not to lie to me. We have the testimony of all three family members that you were with them in the woods - you and Andia Pugis - enjoying their grill party and discussing ways and means of importing more contraband - not only to their area, but also into the City."

This I hotly denied and insisted that he interview Miss Pugis who would tell him that we had been held prisoner, tied hand and foot, threatened with sticks, verbally abused, spat on and put in fear for our lives.

"Miss Pugis is being.....processed, Mr Yensis, as we speak. But I am puzzled. If you were the victims of such an outrage, why did you not mention it? Why have you just lied to me? Why did you lie to your committee?"

He sounded like a father disappointed to hear dishonourable reports of his son. The daughter had released us, I told him, on condition that we would not report her father. Later, I had agreed with Miss Pugis to report only the brandy

"Neno - you are a Guardian - an Alpha Plus - sworn to uphold the Constitution. You are obliged to report illegal materials and activity. No promise made to a village girl can supercede that."

He took out sheets from the ring binder which I instantly knew were the transcript of our last discussions in committee. The friendly creases around his eyes disappeared as his finger looked for the phrase he wanted. He cleared his throat, drank some water and waved an invitation at my empty glass and the carafe. I shook my head.

"Here, Miss Pugis says that the bottle was buried to protect the forest. But...it was...NOT! And yet you did not see fit to correct her in committee. Was that not a kind of lie? The failure to mention the encounter with the villagers - deception. The story of the lost ID - deception. Can you not see, Neno Yensis, that if you practise deceit, nothing you say can be believed? It is my duty to establish the truth and part of my job is to help the innocent accused to achieve safety and exoneration - but you are not helping me to save, young man."

He stood and put a pen into my quivering hand, and told me to write out a statement, warning me kindly that one more lie, if proven, could lead to the very serious charge of deceiving a Senior Investigator. He patted my shoulder, left the room and I began recording those events in meticulous detail, including every word of the villagers I could recall, in hope and expectation that my version and Andia's would tally. The red binder lay closed a few centimetres from my left hand and I wondered if it had

been left there to tempt me. I resisted. The room was stuffy and increasingly claustrophobic, causing me difficulty in breathing, partly due to apprehension of what the next step might be. Detention? In a tiny room below ground, such as the one I was in? I waited and waited and began to sweat. Even the silence seemed to rob me of breath. My hand, trembling, hovered over the binder. Imagining his eye watching me through a tiny peephole, I got up and went to the door for air but found it locked. Trying to control my panic, I looked around the room for distraction - a picture I could stare at and escape into. But the walls were bare. In a corner above me, a tiny fly was trapped in a web. I closed my eyes and "entered" the forest but before long, through the trees, that spiral of smoke came into view. I tried to picture the glade where we had lain together but the ugly red face of the giant was grinning back at me through the bracken.

As quickly as I could, I leafed through the contents of the binder, almost chuckling over the ungrammatical, ill-spelt statements of the villagers, read my curriculum vitae and the transcript, and, seeing no inaccuracies, I closed it.

The door opened. The official came over and scanned my statement, then placed it inside the binder. He winced and rubbed his right elbow, telling me about his arthritis. When he added, almost as an afterthought, that I was free to go - what a sigh of relief I released! As I opened the door he allowed me to get half-way out before saying, that in view of the seriousness of the allegations and (unspecified) "other matters" I would be confined to my flat for a "few days" pending "further enquiries" and it would not be in my interest to flout the order - *his* decision. I looked back at him. The smile had vanished.

Andia was being *processed*. The word stuck and repeated itself in my mind like a song you cannot silence, acquiring ever more macabre undertones. I could concentrate on nothing long; within minutes of reading anything or listening to the radio my thoughts were straying and resettling like flies on those putrifying events and speculating on the outcome, sometimes optimistically, but mostly the opposite. Amongst the most exquisite tortures are the ones we are induced to inflict upon ourselves. Every time I phoned Andia's flat I was sure that *this* time she would answer and I would hear her cheery voice. After a few days, I had extended the number of rings I decided to count before hanging up, to fifty. By the end of that week I was so desperate that I cautiously opened my door late one evening and peered along the corridor looking for a green uniform. How seriously was the order being enforced? I had crept ten yards when a neighbour's door opened and the startlingly pretty face of the younger officer appeared. I apologized and said I needed milk. She told me to wait and returned with a large bottle. I asked her how much longer I would be contained but she shook her head - and again when I asked about Andia. Slowly she shut the door. I was longing for company and for news so I knocked but she did not return. Dejected beyond measure, in tears, I went back to my flat.

How should one react to such psychological pressure? I was tempted to seek oblivion in my wine rack but decided that might be what my adversaries intended. My adversaries! Was the inducement of paranoia part of the plan too? I tried to be optimistic about my predicament. The three villagers' testimonies would surely contradict each other at some point - and it could be easily argued that they had a vested interest in shifting the blame for their contraband onto me. Besides - and this will seem elitist - would their word against an Alpha Plus be taken very seriously, and would they prove credible witnesses? Andia would also confirm my innocence. Someone on the committee, maybe our earnest ecologist, would propose my

reinstatement. Why would I report the trade of illegal materials if I was a beneficiary of it? My “crime” had been to protect people who had used intimidation and violence - (I cursed myself for not having my abrasions and bruises medically certified) - low people who had lied to save their own skins. Surely someone in authority would have the good sense to see the truth! Yes, as a Guardian, I was duty-bound to report crime - and had done so without reporting the criminal - but under exceptional circumstances. Due to a naïve sense of honour I had made an error of judgement, not committed an act of malfeasance. Perhaps a reprimand would be my punishment, to be wiped, I hoped, from the record after a year.

I paced the floor rehearsing what I would say to a tribunal, imagining the claims of the prosecutor and meeting them with my rebuttals. Gorkis and his allies would not get the upper hand this time! I would be on my mettle. My chess teacher had drummed it into me in my youth - *Before you move in for the kill, always make sure your opponent is not about to kill you!*

Gorkis and his *allies*?..... The villagers? - Had Gorkis intervened and persuaded them to lie? - Was he somehow involved in the spirits trade himself?? My feverish mind saw such a massive conspiracy and swindle of the People, which I - rising from these ashes of despair in triumph - would expose, to be acclaimed a Hero of the Republic!

*

“Please open the door” I whispered after several soft raps. “I need to speak to someone.”

The corridor was semi-lit and empty. A door much farther away briefly let out a trapezium of light and then closed. I knocked again, this time harder. If there was no one there, I would walk down to Andia’s apartment. I had a key.

“It’s late” said a husky voice. “Go away.”

“I need to speak. I have evidence. It is your duty as an officer to hear it, even at this hour.”

The door opened a few centimetres, revealing a shadowy figure in a night gown. The older woman. She asked me if I had been drinking and when I shook my head she opened the door wide. On a low table by the sofa was a bottle of my favourite red wine from Mirnau, full apart from wine in the neck, the small amount she had already poured into a large glass. On the radio, low and langorous, was a Beethoven quartet. She waved me into an armchair. She sat down opposite and tucked her legs underneath her. She said that this was irregular and she really ought to report it. But, sensing she was lonely too, I knew she would not. She fetched me a glass and half-filled it. Cautiously, I took a sip. To my astonishment, she took out a packet of cigarettes and lit one.

“Would you like one, Neno?”

It had already crossed my mind that this might be a honey-trap. I was about to state my disapproval when she told me to spare her the lecture. She was about forty, a handsome rather than a pretty woman with a broad, pale face, slightly oriental, and intelligent cat-eyes. I asked her if she took shifts with her young colleague to spy on me, but she did not answer. She began to cough like an inexperienced smoker might and soon stubbed the offensive object out. I did not need to make a comment.

“I keep telephoning my colleague Andia Pugis, but she does not reply. It is now eight days since I saw her.”

“Colleague? You are lovers.”

“We are both - not that that is really your affair. Have you any idea what has become of her?”

She swirled the wine around in her glass and put it down without drinking. I left mine alone.

“Is she ill? Has she returned to her village in the Outlands? Please, if you know, at least tell me she is safe. I know perfectly well that I am being softened up for my interrogation but this is more than unfair.....”

As my voice rose with emotion, I stopped. Her features were like a painting on a cold, flat stone. Finally she spoke.

“You said at the door you have evidence.”

“Yes. The first part concerns Andia. Miss Pugis. She has been suborned by a police agent - on someone’s orders - into spying on me. She confessed it to me. The second matter concerns a man called Briso Salkis, a villager from Zendau, who has never emerged from detoxication as he should have done. He is being detained illegally below us - at this very instant - in the Vault. My third matter concerns the bribing of border guards and higher officials, and concerns a conspiracy to trade our surpluses illegally, a conspiracy which may even reach as high as the Coordinating Committee.” She looked about as surprised as if she had been told her that the day after today was called tomorrow. Very simply she said “Yes, I think it does.”

I shall never forget the chill of that moment.

“The whole system is rotten, Neno. Drink your wine. I shall deny I said that, of course. In the woods you put your hand into a wasps nest and now, I’m afraid, you will have to pay the price. Who do you think I really am? A middle-aged low-level functionary half-way through a humdrum career? ”

Now I was on my guard more than ever. She began to tell me of her fall from grace after almost reaching the apex of her ambitions. Upon looking for a file in the drawer of her superior, Meno Fertis, she had discovered a bottle of German brandy. He had accused her of planting it to discredit and leapfrog him to the highest position and a better flat on a higher floor in the Dome. Her eyes guided mine up towards the top floor as she added that Fertis - now Chief Officer at the Dome - had powerful friends. “They sent me for remediation after I confessed.”

I demanded to know why she had confessed, if she was innocent. She told me of her daughter in medical school. It had been put to her that she might fail her examinations. Could this really be true, I wondered - another case of blackmail?

“Are you telling me the truth or are you trying to get me to make an unwise comment which you will report me for?”

She smiled but not pleasantly. Could I not see, she sneered, that either way the truth was depressing?

“The Idea is dying.....The woman Andia is in protective custody as a key witness. She has corroborated the allegation of those worthless village dolts. You are sunk, my friend. You should try to escape.”

“Escape? Where? Abroad? I could not live there amongst all that insane din and pressure. I would rather die.....And I refuse to believe that Andia would ever tell such lies about me.....There must be something we can do - we who still believe. Do you believe?”

“It is the wrong question. I say to you, what is the point of an idea without enough people to believe in it? If you are not prepared to escape, you had better confess your guilt and take your humiliation, as I did. Maybe you will be lucky - they might place you on a farm to shovel dung. Better country air than a stuffy cell. You are the evangelist and are dangerous.”

“Have you been sent to tell me all this? To break my morale? Why should I believe you?”

“You knocked on my door, not I on yours!” she retorted. “This conversation did not take place. Now please finish your wine and go. I am tired.”

She said this as she sat up and undid the three buttons under her chin; to my shame, I felt myself stir. She held a finger to her lips and with her other hand reached inside her gown. I watched her remove a black object which she gently laid on the table. A tiny metallic stem protruded from it. Having pressed a button, she let go of the breath she had been holding and exclaimed that it was off.

“Now we can relax. Would you like a proper drink? A cognac?”

“No. The smell disgusts me. Under the Technology Directive, such an advanced device is illegal. I shall have to report it.”

“No doubt - but be grateful that I had to wear it. It will clear your name. A cognac?”

“Was my favourite wine a part of this plan? Who told you I liked -”

I broke off in despair. Who else but Andia knew about the wine, she who had introduced me to it? Angrily I asked her if the story of her daughter and her demotion was untrue, but she said no, she had been told to use it to gain my confidence.

“Who told you? The old man in the office? What an old fraud!”

“Were you to reveal any of this in your interrogation, you would get me into terrible trouble - and my daughter. Please promise me that you will not. I told you - this recording is enough to clear your name. Calm down. Tell me about your ordeal in the forest. Drink. Trust me.”

I picked up the glass and emptied it. She pressed me for details of our excursion and I began to tell her of Andia’s favourite place in the glade, of our picnic, of her confession, of our discovery, of our awful encounter. The woman asked me many questions - *Had we really found the bottle or taken it along? Had we arranged to meet the villagers? Had we spent the night in the farmhouse as had been alleged?* Suspecting that the device was not really off, I played along and of course told the truth. When I thought we had finished she asked me if I had made love to Andia in the forest. The memory of that wonderful time, subjected to such a sudden, brutal question, made my voice catch in my throat and I could say nothing more. She pressed me again but I shook my head. She went to pour me more wine but I put my hand over my glass. She lay back against a cushion.

“Now I really am going to bed. Will you join me, Neno? I have been very lonely - for many months.....”

This admission made my heart race at the prospect of a furiously passionate experience, but my vow to Andia stopped me. I thanked her for the wine and left.

The next morning I was properly arrested by three burly males. I was relieved - even grateful. This was not long before that foul event took place which would change all our lives for ever.

The Vault

Do not run away with the idea that I was thrown straight into a filthy cell with others in stinking rags. My “cell” was a flat with five prints on the wall, pictures of our beautiful landscape, villages and forest; I had a lounge, a small kitchen, a bathroom and a separate bedroom. Missing were a window and a view because I was in the Vault. Strangely, I felt unburdened to be in the hands of those faceless strangers now controlling me. It felt like being back at infant school. The timetable, the agenda, the rules were theirs and I only needed to conform. The cynicism of the villagers, of

Andia and the policewoman began to seem unreal and as the days passed, as I listened with closed eyes to the beautiful music on my favourite channel, the conviction grew that all would turn out well. I cooked my own food - the refrigerator and cupboard were well stocked - and I slept soundly. Doubtless, there were rotten apples scattered in the store, but was I not, here, in the custody and protection of those sworn, as I was, to defend the Idea? There was great competition to join this branch of the Guardianship and one had to be at least a Beta Plus. Upon reflection, the thought that I even deserved this setback began to replace my indignation. My conduct had been immature; my judgment poor; my arrogance in committee - particularly towards Gorkis - reprehensible. The next stage of the process would be good for the soul and one day, perhaps in middle age, I would look back at this episode as a disguised blessing. Even the illegal device - which I was determined to mention to my interrogator - became less and less sinister as I considered the seriousness of the charges against me. Was it not even justified, if I was indeed engaged in illegal trade? The assurance I had received from the policewoman that it would clear me of suspicion consoled me too.

The beautiful pictures on the wall - arranged like a five on a dice - drew in my eyes as I woke one morning and I thought of the cheery deliverers and weather-beaten farmhands waving, of the children splashing and laughing in the great pools, of the picnickers and joggers in the parks. I wept for the Idea. It was not dead! Maybe a very few people wanted more possessions - maybe a proposal should be made to the Constitution Committee to allow a debate about that issue on the radio and in the newspaper. Were we not wise enough to make refinements and adjustments to our way of life as needs arose? We could even lessen the tension between ourselves and our neighbours if we relaxed our import rules. The importation of a few goods did not necessarily imply the adoption of a full-blown consumerist culture. The Mentor himself had foreseen changing circumstances and warned against the fossilisation of the Idea. I leapt out of bed and added these thoughts to my diary which I had been allowed to bring down with me. I went to put it back in the drawer but then, unaccountably, had second thoughts and put it under my mattress instead.

*

I read Andia's statement with a mixture of disbelief and horror. I looked for uncharacteristic turns of phrase and odd choices of words, but found none. The tiny handwriting - which I had seen on her jotting pad in committee - seemed genuine. She told of a pre-arranged meeting and of driving a hard bargain with the villager Salkis for a consignment of brandy which would be hidden beneath sacks of potatoes on a delivery cart.

I forget the rest, because I soon lost interest in that pack of lies. I tried to suppress my anger at Andia who was, of course, adrift between the devil and the deep blue sea, forced to choose between her father's life and her lover's freedom. I only remember my hatred of Gorkis hardening into a sentiment I had never experienced; a determination to kill him.

In the tangle of my thoughts, I had virtually lost sight of my surroundings. The interrogation room I had been escorted to was panelled in pine and the table made of a more solid wood - oak I think. On the wall opposite, there was our green national flag, crossed with the red flag of the city, and surrounding them photographs of the fifty or more retired Chief Coordinators, most smiling, mostly men. I went to push the statement back to the woman but she told me it was my copy and handed me a ring

binder - a green one bearing my name - in which all the documents relevant to my case were contained.

The woman was middle-aged and reminded me ironically of my kind infant teacher Miss Yensis, my namesake. I think it was her earnest grey eyes. But this version of her had thin lips and slightly hollow cheeks. She was stern and dressed very conservatively in a grey suit. On her cheek was a mole with a fine hair growing out of it, and I wondered why she did not have it cut it off. At her right hand were two books - the Philosophy of the Mentor, and next to it The Constitution.

I had begun our meeting by reading out, with her permission, a long statement asserting my innocence and she had listened impassively while the young man adjacent to us - some sort of guard-cum-recorder-cum-protector - had stared at the polished table-top. He had ceased taking notes when I said that the statement would be handed over. I had finished off with the comment that Andia Pugis, who, I had persuaded myself, would have to be a co-defendant, ought to be brought to the meeting in order to clear the matter up quickly. The woman's response had been to hand me casually that statement. Now she told me to open my folder to read the charges against me. I hardly dared peruse the page I saw.

The State against Neno Yensis

Neno Yensis, native of Smijnau, you are charged with the following offences and under the New Constitution have the right to legal representation. These charges and evidence herein will be sent to a Legal Committee which will nominate three counsellors from whom you may choose one. The hearing will be held no earlier than three months and not later than six months after your nomination.

CHARGES

1. Advocacy of genocide
2. Organizing a conspiracy against the State
3. Organizing and leading illegal Opposition to the Constitutional Government
4. Trading with enemies of the State
5. Meeting secretly with a foreign agent
6. Planning to dispose of surpluses on enemy territory
7. Importing contraband damaging to the health and welfare of the People
8. Slandering High Guardians
9. Insulting Guardian colleagues
10. Behaving in a manner unbecoming of a Guardian
11. Deceiving Guardian Colleagues and Investigators
12. Disobeying the direct order of an Investigator.

My insides, my heart, my lungs were frozen, as if ice had been forced down my throat. My lips would not move. The woman began to fulminate against the Opposition and the young man took out a pad ready for my responses. As she spoke angrily of ever more contraband turning up, more incidents of drunken violence, a sense of growing discontent with our "precious way of life" - discontent stirred up by agents provocateurs under my direction - a faint grey light began to dawn in my head. If the State was indeed corrupt - and could I now continue to doubt it? - then the Opposition - my Opposition - were the true believers in the Idea, and not the other way round. This absurd irony made me laugh out loud, causing the youth to look at

me in wonder and the investigator to rebuke me for my flippancy. Now I came out of my corner fighting.

“*You* can put that pencil down. I refuse to dignify these absurd allegations with a response. And *you*, how can I know that you are trustworthy in spite of what you say, your earnest demeanour.....and your placing of two such great books at your elbow? I can never again know anything for sure - except that *I* am wholly innocent and that *you* are utterly wrong! This is MADNESS. If I were involved in a secret conspiracy, would I expose the very trade I was organizing - from which I was benefiting ? The notion is too nonsensical to be taken seriously for one second.”

She sat back unperturbed. She wanted, she said, to put a scenario to me.

“Superficially the notion is absurd, I agree. But suppose that the leader of such a plot, one of the cleverest graduates ever of our very best tertiary school, is also extremely devious. How would he ensure that no suspicion fell on him? By projecting himself as luke-warm or indifferent to the ideals of our great society? By being slovenly, unshaven, unpunctual, ill-mannered? Or would he be scrupulously orthodox and enthusiastic? Would he dress and groom himself immaculately, and keep himself trim and fit? If you were a traitor, Mr Yensis, which of these two personae would you cultivate - the apostate or the evangelist? To complete the deception, what a coup of ingenuity to report a minor occurrence of the very grand crime of which he is guilty. You know, I almost congratulate you on it. But we have a man and a woman in custody who swear that you offered not to report them in return for a share of their ill gotten gains.”

She placed her palms flat on the table, and her eyes which had gleamed with fervour opened wider - as if in invitation for me to admire her insightfulness and concede defeat.

I had many faults, but deviousness was not one of them. Such topsy-turvy logic had never occurred to me and I had to think quickly how to respond.

“If the leader of this Opposition - me, you say - is so very, very clever - so vital to the whole enterprise - would he chance to go in person to discuss terms with a drunken lout - or would he send a representative?.....Your face, Mrs Iraklis, tells me the answer - there is no need to say a thing.....So, let me put a scenario to you, Mrs Iraklis....I will allow now that there is, in all probability, an Opposition. My colleague, Andia Pugis was blackmailed - not only to copy down by dictation this crop of filthy lies - but also to spy on me. I believe I have a powerful enemy determined to discredit me for his own criminal ends. I am due to rise after him to the Logistics Committee. My presence there - on a committee so vital to his schemes - would surely hamper them..... I am certain that you, Mrs Iraklis, a senior Guardian of committee personel, are an honest defender of our social values. The illegal importation of spirits and tobacco would concern you greatly, so much that the investigatory arm of the service, under you, would put its entire energy into combating it, root and branch. Am I right?”

She nodded and placed her palms together as if in prayer. She asked me if I had finished.

“Not quite. The Opposition, the true Opposition, knowing you to be so conscientious, and - may I say so - astute - believe you can be persuaded to interpret my behaviour as duplicitous - given the false testimony of others - so much so, that you will concentrate your attention entirely on me, allowing those genuinely guilty to carry on unsuspected. What if the illegal import of a few crates of spirits is a distraction from something much more sinister? What if you are looking in the wrong tree - my tree - while the real villainy is happening behind your back?”

“So I am their dupe, rather than yours?” she asked with unexpected sarcasm. The reason soon became apparent. She took out a device from a drawer and pressed a button. Instantly I heard the voice of my neighbour offer me a cognac to which I answered yes. To all her questions about the events in the forest I replied with a self-incriminating yes - *Did you take the bottle along? Did you arrange to meet the villagers? Did you spend the night in the farmhouse as alleged?* All yes. I racked my brains. Had I said yes at any point in that late-night meeting? My accuser pressed another button and the dialogue ended.

“So, Neno Yensis” she asked superciliously “Am I your dupe or their dupe?”

I breathed slowly to control my inner turmoil before responding.

“Their dupe, Mrs Iraklis. We both are. I am a dupe because I believe people and their stories. I am a poor judge of character. For example, I *did* think that you might be intelligent enough to suspect at least that this recording might have been altered to incriminate me. I expect that they have technicians who have the means to do that. You, particularly, should consider all possibilities.....but, sadly, you have closed your formidable mind.”

I demanded that the older policewoman be brought to the room to face me, but Iraklis refused.

“In your folder you will find a transcript of the conversation you had with Officer Polensis. She will be at your trial as a prosecution witness. Your counsel can examine her then.”

“I ask you again to believe me that you are making the gravest of errors, Mrs Iraklis. My enemies will be pretty pleased with themselves - and also with you.”

As I left under escort, I turned to take a last look at her. And what I saw in her face strengthened me. She was staring at the device and in her eyes I saw a hint of doubt.

* * *

Jula, my beautiful, kind secretary, has come into my room with flowers this morning and made an intelligent suggestion. She tells me the book needs a rest from me; that a change of voice would not only be welcome, but justified. The authenticity of my account would never be questioned by students of history. And did one who recorded the scenes of battle have to be right in the middle of the fray? Besides, on the night of the assassination I had been in the Vault - so a third person narrative, in view of the bare facts being on record from other reliable sources, was not inappropriate for a while. While I considered, she ushered into the room a man who brought in a series of files. These, she announced, were the archive of statements on events at that crucial time. From these, a narrative could be constructed, allowing some scope for novelistic artifice without compromising historical truth.

Jula has literary aspirations of her own, and I have been only too pleased to let her work with me in fashioning the next terrible part of the history.

The Assassination

“Are you in bed yet, Dav?”

“Is that you Grano? What’s wrong? I hardly recognize your voice.”

“You had better come - twenty-ninth - no, thirtieth floor. Lift door. Something terrible.....Just come. *Please.*”

Davo and Grano were watchmen responsible for the corridors on the five floors above the twenty-fifth. Davo had been replaced on shift at midnight by the younger man,

and he had been on the point of pouring himself a well-earned nightcap. Instead, he found himself running up the staircases which led to the floor in question. He took the fourth corridor right which led directly to the core of the building, the lift shaft. He could see Grano at the end of that corridor staring down at a shoe. Davo had never seen a blood-letting and the sight of a woman lying amongst so much gore made his ears sing. Grano was standing behind her, holding a reddened envelope by the corner.

“Did she have an accident?”

“No..... She just.....fell out of the lift holding her neck. He pushed her out. He must be on the top floor by now.”

“He? Did you see his face?”

“No. Only an arm. He pushed her out.”

“Did you call the police?”

When Grano failed to answer, Davo grabbed his intercom device and entered the emergency code plus the number thirty. He looked up and saw 50 in the lift display. He knelt down and studied the profile of the woman who was contemplating her own blood. Her cheek was already surprisingly cold to his hesitant touch.

“She told me to get the letter from her pocket and give it to Neno somebody.”

“She was alive?”

“For a few seconds.”

Davo thought he recognized her. She was about twenty-five, brunette and very slim, dressed in a light grey raincoat. The soles of her shoes were damp. Her brown eyes staring into her own death was an image he would never forget.

“I think she’s on a special committee,” he whispered, inspecting the deep gash in her neck. “Flat on a lower floor. Twenty-eight or twenty-nine, I reckon. I *have* seen her. Neno, Neno.....I *know* I’ve heard that name recently. ”

But Grano was not listening, only weeping and pleading with him not to report him - *please don’t report me, Dav* - for delaying. Davo held up his hand for him to be quiet. The whirring sound announced the descent of the lift. As it passed floor 34, Davo stood up, reached out and pressed the button. Down came the lift past floor 31 and he wondered if his stop command would be overridden - but, no, the whirr had turned to a soft sigh as the lift settled and the great doors slowly opened.

In the corner, sitting up, almost grinning, with legs splayed and stretched forward in blood was the corpse of a man.

“That’s him!” exclaimed Grano.”The leather jacket!”

“Step back!”

He pushed Grano out and sent the lift on its way down.

“What are you doing?”

“Forget it, Grano.....Neno who? Did she say a surname?”

“It began with a “yer”. Her voice just faded out.”

Now the lift was ascending. It spurred Davo into a decision which would save his life.

“I’m not supposed to be here, Grano. Calm yourself. It was only a two minute delay.

No-one will know. Just tell them the lift was going to the bottom floor and you just came round the corner and found her dead. Nothing else, do you hear me? It will keep you and me safe. Give me the envelope.”

“Why? It’s important!”

“Do as I say!”

Davo could never explain why he encouraged Grano to lie or why he took the envelope. The second corpse just told him it was the right thing to do. And it was.

Back in his tiny flat, situated on the corner of an internal block on the twenty-fifth

floor, Davo poured himself a stiffer drink than he had earlier intended. He needed, of course, to calm his nerves. His partner, Giana, came wondering out of the bedroom in her pyjamas. She had retired early, nursing a cold and had taken tablets. She immediately saw something was amiss because Davo was so pale, and because he only ever drank brandy on rare occasions after a good dinner. When she enquired, he simply told her that there had been a murder and she sat down as if her knee tendons had snapped.

“A murder? But you had come off duty! Why did you go back out?”

“I had a call from...my replacement. He’s quite new. He forgot to call the police. It’s a good job for him I went - otherwise he’d be in trouble. Pass me the Committees File on the shelf, please.”

“Don’t drink any more of that stuff, Dav. It will be on your breath.”

“Alright. Pass me the file and go back to bed.”

Neno was such a common name. Davo leafed through the pages and pages of faces which as a watchman he was expected to know. As soon as he turned onto the Agricultural Surplus Committee page, he saw immediately, second from the top left, the enthusiastic face of Neno Yensis, and that is when he remembered being formally told of his suspension. Lower down was the picture of that earnest woman, dusky, with such intelligent eyes, now dead. What a terrible waste, he thought, of a beautiful young life.

There was no mention of the murders on the one o’ clock bulletin nor the two o’clock. The three o’ clock had been running about five minutes - talking again about floods in South America and deprecating again new outbreaks of rioting in London and Paris - so that Davo was stopping the brandy when the newsreader interrupted himself to report “a murderous event” in the Dome. A watchman named Grano Boskis had been arrested on suspicion of slicing open the carotid artery of a Guardian and stabbing a police guard who had gone to her assistance. The watchman was thought to have been under the influence of foreign brandy and was now in custody. A letter which the woman had been carrying was being examined and was thought to contain information relating to a conspiracy to import spirits and cigarettes.

Further arrests were being made.

When the newsreader went on to other items, Davo poured more brandy, then hid the bottle behind books on a shelf. The blood on the envelope was turning brown. He worried whether Grano would mention it - or his presence. The easiest thing to have done would have been to destroy it, especially as he could no longer think of anyone to trust. Although he already knew the answer, he checked the police roster and the officer on call was indeed Berno Porsis, a man he respected. *Had* respected. Evidently he had lied, or had been sidelined or had simply been swept along - or under - by a tide of forces out to pervert justice and truth. This realization, washed down by the brandy made him feel queasy. The envelope claimed his attention again. He asked himself earnestly how many million objects and messages had failed to arrive at their destination in the history of the world. He decided that the world - though it might have been made worse or better had they arrived - was, for sure, none the wiser for their absence. He reached for the envelope with disposal in mind but saw the eyes of the woman, saw her parted lips and “heard” her final plea to have it delivered.

Dark early hours make mental burdens heavier and fear more acute. Apart from the soft, troubled breathing of Giana audible through the narrow crack of the door, and apart from the voices in his head, Davo had nothing to distract him. The jolly music

on the radio had made his nausea worse, and he had switched it off. He felt very lonely and guilty; guilty for deserting Grano, guilty about the brandy, guilty for being tempted to bin the envelope, guilty for having underachieved all his young life. And very guilty for not loving Giana quite as much as he wished he could. How he hated himself now for being persuaded to take the brandy flask from a colleague - because he had not had the courage to assert his principles - *Go on Davo, put it your bag quick....the authorities are turning a blind eye.....as long as you don't get drunk and go berserk on the stuff.....Go on...it's a digestive.....impress your close friends after a special dinner!* - How bloody weak he had been.

The face of Neno Yensis - handsome and noble with a fine brow - seemed to be staring at him in disapproval from the coffee table. Could such a face belong to a foe? No, here was a man he could surely trust! Davo closed the file. It was nearly five a.m. Cautiously, he opened his front door and looked along the corridor.

The flat number given in the file was 30-57, a large flat two floors higher on the south-facing and most prestigious side of the Dome. If he used the staircase on the south-eastern corner, he would surely avoid any police patrols or guards or cordons across the internal corridors leading to the lift and crime-scene. The floor plan showed 30-57 just a few metres from the staircase door.

The thirtieth floor was dimly lit and, creeping along, as number 57 came closer, Davo needed all his nerve to walk the final few paces ...until he found himself at the door... and, taking a deep breath, he rapped as hard as he dared. There came no answer and as he was debating whether to slide the envelope through the bottom gap, the door of the neighbouring flat opened, allowing out a rod of light which just missed his right boot. "Who are you and what do you want?" asked a dark female voice. Davo could only see a black patch - no features - in the backlit door-gap.

"I wanted to speak to Mr Yensis."

"At this time of night? Who are you?"

"A friend. A colleague. It is no matter for you. Close your door and get back to bed."

The woman indignantly announced she was Officer Polensis, demanding to know what matter could be so important that it could not wait till daybreak. Davo instantly realised that a police officer would never be allocated a flat in such a prime position, and he put the envelope he had been shielding by his left thigh back into his pocket. Though given to indolence, he was intelligent - intelligent enough to guess what must have happened to Yensis. He turned his back on the woman and walked rapidly back to the staircase, ignoring her calls for him to return. There had been so little light on the corridor, and, descending three steps at a time, he persuaded himself that she would be unable to recognize him.

Davo Puski, twenty-six, had grown up on a farm and had never aspired to much. He was content to tend the livestock - cattle, goats and sheep - and took particular delight in harvesting the October pumpkins - dark orange skinned and rich golden fleshed - which he had sown on the dung heaps in March and watched swell all summer through. His widowed father was already ailing by the time Davo had turned fifteen and had agreed to allow others to settle his farm in return for his fair share of bread, ale, milk and cheese. After he had found his father dead in bed one morning, it was not long before he and his sister had moved to the city to live with a kind aunt. The many attractions there soon made him forget the land and he began, by a supreme effort of self-discipline, to make up for years of indifference to schooling, so much so that at eighteen he matriculated in the Beta stream with one of the best exam scores

for that year entry, allowing him to take his pick from many Posts of Responsibility. Working and living in the Dome were at first a great honour, but by the age of twenty-two, patrolling corridors and checking on residents and committee rooms had become so tedious and unrewarding that he applied to become a State Guard in order to be nearer to his sister who had returned home to marry. Then he had met Giana.

It was the result of that application (and extra examination) which he was awaiting at the time of the assassination. The more responsible part of him - the maturing man - wanted to discover how brandy and other contraband were coming into the country, the great secret which many knew. He was not above taking a noggin after a delightful dinner, being on the pragmatic side of idealism, but it did make him feel uneasy. The murder and the announcement on the radio had turned his unease into alarm. By total accident he had walked straight into a conspiracy. The letter which he had placed back on the coffee table could not simply be handed in - it would prove he had been present at the murder scene - and, worse for him, it would contradict the official version of events; it could not simply be left lying about to be found; neither could it be hidden or, worse, destroyed - his conscience would not permit it; for one thing, it might contain evidence fatal to the conspirators. He felt a reluctant duty to take care of it.

He awoke in the armchair at around nine as Giana was preparing breakfast in the kitchen. He called out for coffee. She brought him a mug and told him the news was terrible - so many arrests.

"I cannot believe that little Grano would be capable of such a thing. To me, he just seemed a nice, shy young man. It just goes to show how deep still waters can run. It must have been cognac. It changes people. The report said there'd be an amnesty for bottles. Please promise me you'll hand yours in. We don't want you arrested too."

Giana was a nurse who worked sometimes with alcoholics. She had seen a gradual rise in their numbers and this worried her. It also accentuated the trait in her which Davo found most irritating - a tendency to lecture and moralise. Davo was in no mood to be lectured that morning but bit his tongue - more or less.

"I poured the brandy away, Gia." he said. "Please, leave it at that."

He realised, after Giana had left for work, that she had not noticed any discrepancy between his account the previous midnight and reports on the radio. He put this down to her cold and drowsiness. On no account, he decided, should he enlighten her and he would tell her, if it ever occurred to her to query his version of events, that Grano had not been around when he had arrived on the scene. He slid the envelope from underneath a magazine, feeling odd to be the only person - certainly not within the conspiracy - to know the truth. He wondered if Grano was still alive. He toyed with the idea of returning to the flat above with the letter, but remembering that Yensis had been suspended, and taking everything else which had happened into account, Davo felt certain that its intended recipient would not be there. So, after much debate, he felt entitled - even obliged - to take up a paper knife. He inserted the point in a corner and slid it along the top crease of the envelope.

The handwriting was small and scrawled - the writer had obviously been in a hurry. But the main obstacle to deciphering it was the blood stain which, when the page was opened out, took on the symmetrical appearance of a brown butterfly. Davo removed the shade from the table lamp and held it in front of the bulb so that he was eventually able to read the following in its entirety.

Dear Neno,

After what was discussed in committee, I could not stop thinking about the bottle in the woods in the hot sun. I just knew you had lied about burying it, but I did not understand why. I have always respected your integrity (if not your want of tact) and I refused to believe the rumour that you, of all men, were involved in such a low trade as the import of spirits. I could not rest and therefore went out yesterday to the forest and to the village of Zendau. There, I soon found a dysfunctional family - Salkis - who had been mentioned on the radio and was dumbfounded when the mother told me of a corrupt Guardian named Neno Yensis who had got them all involved in smuggling. I refused to believe this, yet the mother was adamant. It was only after I had left, that the daughter - a good girl - whose striking eyes were the very soul of honesty - caught up with me and told me the true story - about your capture in the forest and that she had released you. Then she admitted that a City Official had offered her father a shortened stay in remediation as long as he agreed to implicate you in cross-border crimes. She did not know the man's name but her description - his good looks were marred by a red mark on his lower right eyelid - matched Andia's description of a corrupt official in the July Committee, and I believed her.

I am staying now with my mother in the City and have a strange feeling that the house is being watched. So I have written and shall now deliver this letter to your flat which should help reinstate you to Committee. At the next meeting I shall report what I have discovered to Luzo Gorkis and propose that your exclusion be rescinded,

Yours in the true honour of Guardianship,

Rosima Solcis

PS I have already written of these matters to Luzo Gorkis

Davo now faced an even more painful dilemma. In his shaking hand he held absolute proof that Rosima had been killed to prevent her alerting others to corruption, and all his upbringing and schooling told him - despite his farmboy's inclination to mind his own matters and remain silent - that it was his duty to inform the authorities. But which authorities? Clearly, not the local ones if he wished to avoid Grano's fate. He slipped the letter back into its envelope, realising that the blood itself would prove it to be the work of Rosima Solcis. Why had that silly fool Grano not simply entered the emergency code and had done with it - leaving him to sip his late night wine in peace? How blissful then his ignorance would have been! Then he had a brilliant idea - to write to the Chief Co and expose the conspiracy. Or, perhaps more sensibly, to the head of the Surplus Committee on which Rosima had sat. He found the name in the file - the same name in Rosima's postscript - and after many false starts wrote the following.

Dear Luzo Gorkis,

I hold proof that Rosima Solcis was murdered to prevent her passing evidence on to Neno Yensis which would clear him of involvement in smuggling brandy. In addition, I know that the watchman arrested is wholly innocent, as I was passing

when the dying woman was pushed onto the corridor by a man in the lift. I went and fetched the watchman who then alerted the police by intercom. The real murderer went up to the fiftieth floor.

Caution prevented him from signing his name and he simply wrote “resident”. Before he sealed the letter he had another brilliant idea. A flat on an adjoining corridor was temporarily vacant due to a problem with its air-conditioner, and he soon found the number he had dutifully entered in his record book. He wrote it at the top of the letter and took it to the internal post station by the lift on his floor.

All that morning he sat by his front door, opening it a crack now and then to listen to what was going on in his corridor and the one which branched off it. At just gone one o’clock, his patience was rewarded when a very loud thumping was heard. He joined other residents just in time to see the door of the flat in question being knocked off its hinges. They were all ordered to return to their quarters by the tallest of three uniformed policemen. His question about Gorkis seemed to have been answered, but he realised he had been reckless. An imaginative investigator might soon realise who could have written the letter.

As he paced the corridors that evening, he racked his brains to find a way to get Giana to leave for her own good. He was too kind to tell her that he did not - quite - love her enough. The hours crept by, there being no-one on his corridors to exchange a few words with. The few police officers posted at intervals seemed determined to remain silent. No curfew had been imposed but it felt like one had.

Back at his flat at twelve, he found his problem had been solved. A letter had arrived by last post to announce that his application to join the State Guards had been successful, and that his induction would soon take place near the frontier at Kronau. He showed Giana the letter and her reaction was one of annoyance rather than sorrow. “You told me that you were applying for the local force” she said. “No. I knew you weren’t listening. All guards are trained at the border first - it stiffens their patriotism. Then they can be deployed in other places. In a few months I shall return to the City. You know, of course, that you will not be able to stay here when I leave. The flat will go to my replacement. Shall you return to your mother - for a while?”

Giana had mixed feelings about that. She thought she might take up the offer of a room at the clinic while Davo trained. She might even apply for a transfer to Kronau.

The “might” and the dead tone in which it was uttered illuminated a secret corner in Giana’s feelings for him, and he felt relieved.

With Giana gone, Davo could relax a little, having only his own safety to worry about. But rumours of more arrests - both of Dome officials and citizens - were soon rife. He could not wait to leave the flat, fearing a rap on his own door at any time. The radio spoke of antisocial elements, mentioning new phrases which made him go cold - an “improper admiration of alien culture and material” , “consumerist deviation” , “acquisitive weakness” and - most chilling of all - a “necessary process of disinfection.” Commentators, once friendly and intimate, were mechanically urging citizens to report suspicious activity. Special powers had been taken because of the murders and the existence of an Opposition; public gatherings were restricted - and then banned when Luzo Gorkis - nephew of Mero, the Chief Coordinator was found

in his flat with his throat cut. Guns were issued to Guards and Dome watchmen placed under the direct control of Meno Fertis, Chief of Police. For Davo, a little man in possession of a great truth, these developments were almost overwhelming and he was so relieved to leave for Kronau. He packed his few possessions and wondered whether to conceal the envelope under a carpet or at the back of a drawer. But the flat might be searched or renovated, causing it to come to light and lead to his arrest.

So in the end he took it with him.

* * *

Jula thinks that for the time being we should leave Davo there - cycling out to Kronau - and return to my deteriorating situation as martial law took an ever tighter grip. This morning I woke in pain and in a very depressed state, made no better by the announcement that a foreign retail chain is to be allowed to open in the city and larger towns. I can guess only too well what my friend Vito Pejjs, mentioned at the outset of this history, will be thinking of that. Jula is wide-eyed and excited - soon a new currency will be issued to each citizen, in amounts varying according to their academic grades and the importance of their social role. She tells me this will be fair and I nod and smile, too disinclined to argue. She is, of course, an Alpha.....

My Ordeal Begins

I stared at the Indictment Sheet..... *Advocating Genocide*. Where had such an appalling charge come from, if not from that pedant Gorkis? That hypocrite had pretended to take my comment in Committee - about there being too many people - seriously! I knew my counsel would make short work of it, but the other charges were more serious. I was writing out detailed rebuttals of each one late into the night when the dreadful news of the young Guardian's murder was announced. My first thought was *it must be Andia*, and it took me most of the night to persuade myself that if she was in protective custody - as a key witness against me - then it could not be her. Yet I knew in my gut and bones that the death was linked somehow to my situation - Floor 30, my floor. The mention of a letter about illegal trade which the victim had been carrying, and news of further arrests convinced me. Naively, I began to hope that the letter would prove me innocent.

A few hours later, I was reading that very letter under the watchful eyes of Mrs Iraklis and the photographed eyes of Chief Coordinators, some benign, some severe. The letter was addressed to Mr Gorkis (who lived on my floor near the south-western corner.) It spoke of discussions between her and the Salkis family in Zendau, and with unnamed others of that village, all of whom maintained that a Guardian called Neno Yensis was organizing a trade in spirits in return for surpluses.

"Is this the original? Or has it been copied out?" I asked. "Is this the original envelope?"

She nodded.

"Poor Rosima. The radio said her neck artery was severed. The heart must have pumped up litres of blood in the short time before the chambers emptied. Thank God she was dead in seconds. Even so, for her, an ecologist, it must have been a very distressing way to die."

"Are you making some attempt at black humour, Mr Yensis? You dare express pity for her when a drunken co-opponent of yours *killed* her?"

She was an interrogator, and had no connection to the Dome police force. She would have accepted without question the version of events given to her. I allowed her a triumphant moment of self-righteousness before rejoining.

“Pity, Mrs Iraklis? Oh no, I wasn’t thinking about pity - although I did admire and like Rosima. She was a dedicated, true believer. No. I was wondering how this paper managed to stay so clean amongst all that bloodshed. Not a speck! An amazing stroke of luck, a miracle even, for your investigation.”

I pushed the letter back into the envelope and handed it back to her, noticing the writing on the front for the first time. I told her it was odd that Rosima, who abhorred all formality had written *Mr Gorkis*.

“She always insisted we call her Rosima. And she always called Gorkis Luzo, even when he was on his high horse - not to annoy him - which it did - but because that’s how she was.”

Was that grey, intense woman opposite me blushing? When I asked her what other matters she might wish to raise with me at that point, she shook her head. So I stood up. As I left under escort, I asked her to put the letter and the *dirty* tape in a box and label them *fabricated*. She still did not look up from my file.

It took a little while to work out what was different in my flatlet-cell. The sweet smell of the air told me that I had had a visitor. Then it dawned on me. The centre picture in the dice-five, of the sunlit wheatfields, had gone. I sniggered almost in despair at their pettiness. But when I checked under my mattress and found my diary gone, with its pages and pages and pages of ideas and arguments, I did not snigger at all.

That afternoon, I was listening to a Brahms quartet and staring at that empty, lighter square on the wall, when I had a visitor. It was Mrs Iraklis. She politely told her junior to wait outside and took a seat next to me on the sofa. She wasted no time in telling me she had taken the decision to retire. Her pained eyes told me that the decision was not entirely hers. I asked her who would replace her on my case and she mentioned a man called Glumis and described him as very thorough and competent.

“But is he fair?” I asked. “As dedicated to getting to the truth as you?”

I could not help but load my voice with irony, but instantly regretted it. Even in error, she was a person of integrity. She responded slowly and with some warmth.

“I have come to say goodbye to you and wish you luck. And to give you informal advice. If you confessed - if you admitted some of the charges - your remedial time would not be too long - and you would avoid....some unpleasantness.”

“Right! Perhaps you could tell me which charges I should admit! Here, tick them with a pencil!”

I handed her my file but she failed - or refused - to acknowledge my mockery, made pencil marks on the paper and handed it back. Besides a few minor things, she had circled the allegation of illegal trade.

“But you know I am innocent. You know this is a confection of lies. You have been sent along to soften me up!”

When she leant across, placed her hand briefly on mine and nodded, I almost rejoiced. If only one decent person knew I was innocent, I could bear the pain of a thousand lesser people being convinced of my guilt.

“Neno,” she whispered, almost in tears “Guilt or innocence will no longer be the standards by which men are judged. God help us. I urge you to lighten your burden by confession.”

She got wearily to her feet and left. I never saw or heard of her again.

*

I had been to the gymnasium twice - and in my absence my pictures had been reduced to two. A day later I was presented to my new interrogator Glumis. I did not know what to make of him, having expected a dour individual. He was perhaps two years older than me, rather untidily dressed, without a tie, and his shirt and trousers creased. This sloppiness and his smiling eyes were surely meant to disarm me. He was about to begin but I got in first.

“Can you explain why my diary was taken, Mr Glumis?”

“Under emergency powers taken by the Coordinating Committee, rights of prisoners have been curtailed. The diary is being examined for proof of your guilt. We have left you your radio.”

“But taken away three pictures. Was this intended to sap my morale? Do you not realise that I have an imagination and am perfectly able to see pictures of my own?”

“Well, in that case, why complain about their disappearance?”

“You do not consider it petty and stupid to remove them? Am I supposed to be reduced to a quaking, compliant mass thereby? Have the Deltas taken hold of this department?”

He grinned and placed his chin in his palm. He told me that sarcasm would not help my cause one iota. He opened a drawer and placed bundles of banknotes - amongst them New Euros, dollars and British pounds - on the table. He folded his arms and waited for me to react. Money of any kind was of course unnecessary - and illegal. I asked him if he was planning a holiday abroad. Still that irritating smile did not slip and I decided to grin as broadly as him.

“Okay, Mr Glumis, you win. I’ll ask you. Why have you produced this money?”

“You know why. It belongs to you. We found it hidden behind a panel in your flat.”

I laughed. I laughed a long time. He told me it was the income from my smuggling and would be produced as evidence in court. He told me that the evidence - from statements, from the Rosima Solcis letter, from my own mouth - was so overwhelming that I might as well confess.

“If you confess, the tribunal will take a more lenient view of your offences. Instead of maybe thirty years in remediation, you will perhaps receive a sentence of ten to fifteen years. Did not my colleague Iraklis mention that the watchman responsible for the murder of Solcis and the police agent have confessed - in return for immunity from process - that you put him up to it - for cases of brandy?”

You can imagine the feelings of horror that these words - delivered so casually - provoked. I thought of my wonderful parents and of my wonderful teacher Miss Vena and of their optimism and affection for me. I thought of the fields, of the peasants, of the woods, of the sunny days of summers present and past.....before my mind returned to that callous room and that cynical man raising one eyebrow at me. I could either collapse on the spot or maintain my dignity. The quiet hand of Mrs Iraklis touched mine again in my imagination.

“Mr Glumis. If I was in detention here in the Vault, with no means of communicating with persons outside, how could I organize the murder of Rosima Solcis - or of anyone else?”

“.....And then there is of course the murder of Luzo Gorkis. You have a motive. You hated him - Andia Pugis has said so. And he was active in bringing charges against you. There is so far no direct proof - but no doubt we will find it.”

“*Gorkis* is dead? When?”

He told me but I was not really listening. Every assumption I had made about Luzo Gorkis was being overturned in my head. Could he really be - not the queen or rook in the strategy against me - could he really be - like Andia, the villager Salkis, the watchman and others - little more than a pawn? The image I had of the plot changed instantly from an airless corridor with unfriendly doors, to a long dark tunnel plumbing the depths. At the end of it - on a medieval throne - sat the one man who should be above all suspicion and reproach. Would he even murder his own nephew? I stared at the bankrolls and had a moment of epiphany. This matter was about far more than a few cases of brandy and packs of cigarettes traded for cartloads of carrots and potatoes! Cash wealth was power, and wealth a passport to the world beyond. As I surveyed, at that instant, our earnest, worthy way of life and our great Idea through greedy eyes - the eyes of the men who were intent only on luxury and vice - all of our ideals seemed utterly ridiculous, and I saw and heard them cynically laughed at in the drunken tones of that vulgar forest giant Salkis who had tormented us.

Glumis was saying something and looking smug. Slowly I looked up and wondered if he was getting - what had it been called in the Old Time? - his cut, his commission, his share of the spoils. What had he just been saying?

“You will have to forgive me, Mr Glumis. The news of Gorkis - in spite of what you might believe to the contrary - has shocked me. I was not listening to you attentively.” This seemed to irk him - because now, with irony, he stressed certain words slowly and heavily, as if he was talking to a stupid child.

“If you **confess** to these crimes, you will get a **reduced** sentence and **the court and witnesses** will be spared a lot of **time** and **inconvenience**. Is that clear enough?”

“Ah, but you overlook a vital point. Why should an innocent man plead guilty? Is that justice? And if the truly guilty men escape punishment, is that justice?”

“But think of the long ordeal you will spare your parents and your sister Hela. Think of the unpleasantness for her young girls. Make a clean breast of it, Neno, apologize, crave mercy and forgiveness - and the suffering - for all - will be less...*acute*.”

I instantly saw his implied threat to my family. These were the tactics of the Nazis and the Stalinists! How could a man be so vile, so cruel as to use a man's sister and her children as weapons against him?

“Do you sleep, Mr Glumis?”

“Do I what? Of course, I sleep soundly, Mr Yensis! I sleep because I am an innocent man while you are guilty. I sleep because I do my duty to protect the Idea - our great society - from renegades who would destroy it. I repeat, your confession would spare everyone much pain. Have you no compassion left?”

“You make veiled threats against my family - even my tiny nieces - and speak of compassion? I repeat, how do you sleep?”

“The wellbeing of all, versus the fate of a few relatives of a murderer and thief of the people's hard work and produce, is an effective cure for insomnia, Yensis.”

“What stinking hypocrisy! Your smiling mouth can make the words *compassion* and *wellbeing* only seconds after implying harm to my nieces. Take me back to my cell! Before I vomit on your carpet!”

He leant back and grinned. He really was drawing huge enjoyment from my predicament. A fellow prisoner would later tell me how pleased the *investigating classes* as he called them were to have something substantial into which to sink their teeth. He knew because before his fall he had been one of their number.

When I was put - pushed - back into my flatlet I saw, of course, that the two

remaining pictures had been taken. Worse, the radio had also gone and, instead of the sofa, there stood a functional bed with two sheets in its place. The refrigerator was empty and the larder bare. I had truly become their dependant. The word *resourceful* flashed across my inner ear, a word my second school history master had used in a report to describe me. Now I would need all my resources to endure and survive this, and the worse to come.

A note from Hela was delivered wordlessly and unsmilingly to me a day or two later. It spoke of her shame, it mentioned her suspension from her logistics committee, it described how our parents had stopped leaving the house in their grief. It begged me to confess. At the bottom of the envelope - and she must have slipped it in there when her supervisor had been distracted, clever girl - was a very narrow ribbon of paper written on in English, to convince me, I supposed, that the sentiments there expressed were genuinely hers.

Neno - ignore letter - officer made me write it - am in bathroom - excuse, I felt ill - committees all suspended - Chief Co special powers - (due to "terrorism!") - We believe in you - be strong - Hela x

I could be brave but not at the expense of her, of her man Berno, and of little Gala and Ermina. The next day I asked to see Glumis and, praying that all who knew and loved me would understand, I wrote and signed a full confession to those charges plus others.

Three days later, a day after my birthday, my mother, never a very strong woman, took her own life and my father descended rapidly into a dark and silent insanity. I prayed every day that Hela and Berno would flee abroad. Then there would be no reason left to be afraid.

Davo's Escape

Having passed nervous checkpoints in the city, and with one case sticking out of a panier at the front, one case strapped to the saddle-platform and with a rucksack on his back, Davo cycled out with growing confidence towards the Old Forest, as Andia and Neno Yensis had done in euphoria a few weeks earlier. Superficially, nothing had changed. The wheat fields were golden and gangs of landlers were hard at work scything and threshing, their songs carrying to Davo's ears on the clear late July air. The wheat gave way to potato fields - mile after mile - where thousands and thousands of tubers were being lifted and their leaves and stems thrown onto great heaps to be shredded for compost. Davo felt a great urge to abandon his cycle and chosen career to return to his old ways. He could bury the letter in his box of chessmen and retrieve it, if necessary, later. What could he do, one insignificant man, with a secret no-one wished or dared to hear?

The trial of Yensis was a major national event. The proceedings were broadcast live on radio, and even film cameras were brought in and screens erected in selected public areas to show the arraignment and confession. The admitted murders of Rosima Solcis and Luzo Gorkis caused uproar and clamours for Yensis to be put to death. It was scandalous that such a trusted Guardian was so corrupt. The radio demanded more scrutiny of the top intelligensia for deviance and it was announced that a good many had been suspended and replaced by others of a lower grade who were undoubted stalwarts of the Idea.

After the trial was over and the judges retired to consider their sentence, the swimming domes and parks were re-opened as the Emergency diminished, but New Guards in green uniforms were brought in on patrol, ostensibly to assure public safety. Citizens were astonished one Sunday morning to hear the gravely voice of none other than Mero Gorkis.

“My heroic nephew was murdered by a selfish clique of opportunists and renegades. We will however not execute Yensis. Our Ideal State rises above brutal revenge. The tribunal has decided that he will be kept in indefinite detention so as not to make a martyr of him for future dissident elements. This also has a practical aspect, for our high committees and investigators are convinced there are more rebels whose identities he can be persuaded to reveal to us. He will spend the rest of his time in the Vault of the Great Dome under the watchful eye of our expert interrogators. The full truth will, I guarantee it, eventually emerge! Happily, the imminent danger of his black conspiracy is stemmed. The great Idea survives! The people continue to prosper! The sun will not stop shining if clouds blow in from the north, nor will our State, the most serene and rational in the history of mankind, be diminished by the crimes of moral pygmies. The price, citizens, of freedom is, however, eternal vigilance! We must now learn lessons - in our generosity of spirit and our naïve belief in the virtue of all, we have allowed enemies, here and abroad, to proliferate amongst us like bacteria on a corpse. The new Green Guards amongst you are your protectors. Befriend them, confide in them, but above all, alert them! Who knows from which quarter the next threat will emerge from those who wait patiently for our watchfulness to relax, like our grip on the handles of a cyclo-carriage!”

Davo listened to this speech with the hundred soldiers in the barracks. Men wept, men cheered, men applauded and embraced, swearing allegiance to the Idea, to the State, to Gorkis, to each other. Davo made a show of joining in, only too aware that Gorkis himself was seriously misled as to the true identity of the Oppositionists, that they still must be conspiring and operating, that the wrong man had been condemned.

Davo smiled and cheered like the rest while his insides burned with the truth.

That night in the barracks, he lay on his back in the whistling, snoring dark, which was deep and quiet enough for his buried thoughts to think themselves. He knew Yensis was an innocent man, but he knew also that he had confessed. Why had he not shouted his innocence at the judges? If he was innocent, why had so many others been arrested? Surely they too must be innocent. Why had Luzo Gorkis, to whom he had written the letter - a man who had been murdered - betrayed him to the authorities?

Nothing made sense. Something was very wrong. That there was corruption, he knew, he himself having acquired brandy. How he loathed this knowing and not knowing, how he envied the men near him snoring in stupidity and ignorance, and how he wished for amnesia. Eventually he slept, never dreaming of Giana, and only thinking of her when he had been awake a while. His own brain was supplying proof to his mind that he did not love her enough for her to be of consequence.

Those early days and weeks of army life offered Davo many opportunities to shove his worries to the back of his head. The letter remained at the bottom of his bedside cabinet. Training routines, border patrolling - he actually caught three locals with a handcart of contraband in the forest - weapons practice and political education from the NCOI - the New Cadre Of Idealists - filled the daylight and early evening hours. After dinner, there was a mixture of cards, reading and occasional visits to Kronau or Zendau to divert him. In the villages there were admiring girls. Letters from Giana

became less frequent and shorter, and one day he received a single page.

Davo,

Please try to understand, I have made a new friend, a medical orderly, and have decided to move into his room. I have sensed, too, in your letters a lessening of affection,

Please be happy,

Giana.

A new friend? Why could people not be more explicit? Davo sulked for ten minutes and was over her.

A week and a day after Gorkis's radio speech, the newspaper included a grand supplement of the court proceedings and every soldier was required by the NCOI officer to read through it that evening. Davo barely recognized the handsome man he had first seen radiating goodwill in the Committees File. Those clever eyes were dead, the cheeks pale and the large head bent as if too heavy now for the neck, too heavy with guilt. The man everyone nicknamed ironically the evangelist, was, as the newspaper said, a fallen angel. It disconcerted Davo that the eyes in another picture of him were staring directly at the camera, as if to say *You know I am innocent - help me!* He turned the pages slowly, and eventually came to the testimonies of a villager called Vendo Salkis and of his wife. Davo instantly remembered the name Salkis, mentioned in Rosima's letter. Furtively, he took it out and confirmed this. Both peasants, the report said, had been brought from the closed island of Bakeria to tell their stories; of the corrupting influence of Yensis and promises of booze, tobacco and paraphernalia in return for their help in concealing contraband in their outbuildings. There were photographs of Cds, cameras, hand-held games and jewelry. At the bottom of the page there was a picture of a sweet girl with astonishing eyes, their daughter Oksima. Both parents appealed through the court for her to give herself up for remediation. A footnote explained that the Salkises had been granted a shorter period of "remediative detention" on Bakeria "tilling the land" in exchange for their "frank" confessions.

Yensis's own confessions filled almost a page. He admitted harbouring secret plans for a programme of euthanasia in order to keep the surpluses and the population in balance; he admitted receiving many and various contraband and thousands in foreign currencies in return for food "stolen from the mouths of the people". He refused however to name his accomplices, saying that they had used code-names - trees, birds and even flowers. The only names he would concede were the "Salkises of Kronau." Davo scanned every sentence for any mention of his colleague Grano who had discovered Rosima Solcis's body but there was none, and Davo concluded that the poor man had been quietly eliminated. He checked his Rosima letter. He compared it to the false letter in the paper and was seized by anger at such foul deception. And he noticed, of course that the Salkis family came not from Kronau but from the other village, Zendau. Was Yensis broadcasting a secret message by making such a mistake? - *I am lying, I am not guilty.* Later, in a toilet, in privacy, Davo began a letter to the Chief Co in which he spoke of Neno's innocence, blaming persons unknown for those crimes he had confessed to. He mentioned the murder he had almost witnessed and the letter. But his own letter made no sense in the light of the trial and in the end it finished in shreds in the sewer pipe.

One day in late autumn, the men were called together by their Commandant. They were, he announced with great delight, to have the highest honour bestowed upon them. The Chief Coordinator himself would be paying Station Kronau a “flying” visit, to congratulate them on their “anti-smuggling campaign” and efforts to hold at bay “alien influences and incursions“. The Commandant had smiled archly over the word *flying*, and the next morning the whole company and all the villages nearby saw why. A silver machine approached from the east and hovered droning over the parade ground before landing vertically as smoothly as a great bird of prey. Out stepped a tall, grey man into the weak sunshine and shielded his eyes. He wore a green uniform with a high collar and tie - and a greatcoat. Who had ever seen a picture of the Chief Co before? None there! Was it not written that the incumbent, apart from his name, had to remain unknown to the public until retirement - when he would be accorded even then no special honours or privileges? Now, there he stood, waving and smiling to them all. He descended a little unsteadily. The ranks of men, stood rigidly to attention, puffing out their chests in pride as he ambled past. Davo saw how ruddy his face was on that chilly morning, and as he came even closer he noticed that the whites of his eyes were dirty. His moustache was also grey and needed trimming. At Davo’s shoulder he stopped and looked him up and down, smiling.

“You are a credit to the Ideal State, young man” he declared with vigour. Something put Davo on his guard. He did not reply and only bowed his head. The CC moved on and mounted a rostrum in front of which stood five young women in rustic costume, garlanded - the women who had traipsed out after him from the plane.

“Men, you may have wondered” he boomed “Why I did not arrive in traditional fashion.....”

All laughed and Davo pretended to.

“.....Only, we live in a time of crisis and it has been deemed vital by the High Committee to acquire this...*magnificent*... er, machine so that I am able to be here, there and everywhere at any moment of the day to....*reassure*... all our people that they are safe and that their efforts on behalf of our Idea are....*appreciated*. That contraption you see there was delivered as a gift of goodwill by a friendly Scandinavian power in return for exports of wheat...and should be considered as an.....*exception*...to our rational edicts as regards *unnecessary* technology.”

On he droned and the chill began to set into the bones of the men. One man sank shivering to his knees and the CC noticed, because he paused to allow him to be led away, but, instead of realising how uncomfortable the men were, that pompous, self-regarding man in his greatcoat, kept going until the commandant whispered in his ear. Davo had resisted the urge to shout out something. What had put him on his guard on parade was something he recognised well. Andia had mentioned once how many alcoholics on her ward had what she called *grey eyes*. And on Gorkis’s praising breath Davo had smelt the faint, sweet whiff of good brandy.

*

The atmosphere in the barracks that evening was mixed. Many soldiers, the more impressionable ones, were chattering about the CC and his amazing machine. In the canteen, a technician in his entourage had boasted to a counter girl that the *hover-jet* could fly half-way around the planet on one tank of fuel, and this claim was on many lips. Other soldiers withdrew from the discussion and turned on their radios or read books. At lights-down, the disembodied voice of the normally silent Julo Parknis who had the bunk to Davo’s right spoke in a whisper. “Why, Davo?”

“Why what?”

“Why does the leader need such an almighty machine in this, our small country?”

“Good question, Juló.”

And why did he turn up tipsy? - he asked himself.

Again, sleep proved elusive that night, and he even took to counting sheep. But when not a sheep but the jet flew over the imaginary gate, he stopped. Gradually, the riddle of Neno Yensis’s self-incrimination solved itself in Davó’s feverish head. It was strange, he would tell his debriefers years later, that the CC’s callous indifference to a man suffering from exposure would be the catalyst. Davó’s auntie had maintained her religion in private and had told him stories of Jesus. In a half-dream before dawn, Davó saw him on a cross. The suffering face belonged to Neno. As soon as he woke with a start in the clammy darkness, the thought of the letter began to burn him inside again.

Two mornings later, Juló Parknis, his neighbour, vanished. He had somehow gone absent from the troop on forest patrol. Rumours spread that he had joined the Opposition deep in the Old Forest not far from the border. Others said he had been kidnapped. Word had it that guns much more powerful than theirs were being smuggled in to begin an insurrection. But even though every woodland track was followed and every glade in the woods searched that week, no body, no rebel gangs nor traces of them – neither ashes nor rubbish - were found. The rumour mill ceased turning. Juló had probably gone abroad, it was concluded, to pursue his own greedy ambitions. Davó began to feel more isolated by that empty bed as the end of the year approached and he applied to be transferred back to the City as soon as his six months training was up. The commandant sent for him.

“When March comes around I will review your application, Davó Puskiš.”

Here sat a man he was inclined to trust. His bookshelves were lined with works of philosophy, with *The New Idea* in three volumes prominently displayed, as well as classic novels from other countries. Here was a cultured man whose noble brow and wide eyes transmitted an aura of honour. He asked Davó with a twinkle in those amiable eyes why he wanted to return to the City. Family? Friends?

“A woman?”

“No, Sir. I am not happy here. I just prefer City life.... I enjoy concerts.”

“Very well. We will see.....but....the City...may not be as much to your liking, Puskiš, as it used to be. Here there are fewer eyes watching, if you catch my meaning...”

When Davó rose to go, the question he had only imagined asking, popped out without warning.

“The CC, Sir! Was he not an impressive man?”

Impressive was the last thing he had been for men with clear wits - and a good nose. The blush in the smooth features of the commandant confirmed two things for Davó. Firstly, the man’s honesty; secondly his disillusion.

“Yes!” he said eventually. “A man....a man who can truly....”

“Truly inspire us?”

The flush deepened.

“And that machine! It could fly even to America non-stop - not that the CC would ever want to! To possess such a machine in such a tiny country as ours shows how important he has become!”

The commandant ceased smiling. He examined his soldier’s face for irony. Davó only grinned more broadly and announced as he went - *yes, a great man indeed.*

*

One evening that same December week, the men in his corner were getting ready to go into Kronau to play against the village dominoes team in a favourite tavern. One player had had to go to the infirmary with a chest infection and Davo was invited to take his place, and he accepted.

The tavern, decked out with midwinter decorations, was very cheery that moonless night. Tables were set out with dominoes and scoreboards, and the local beer soon created a convivial atmosphere, enhanced by the group in a corner around a piano singing bawdy folk songs. By ten, the novelty of the dominoes was wearing off and men had gone up to sing with the others, leaving Davo alone with a wry-faced old villager who kept him entertained with tales and jokes. At length, turning his head to whisper to him slyly, he asked him whether he would like to go somewhere else, where they could taste something better and stronger than the local beer. Curiosity overcame Davo's suspicion and he followed him outside into snow flurries, down narrow streets ill-lit, until the villager stopped outside a large farmhouse in a square of land adjoining the dark forest. He rapped twice long, thrice short, and the door, opening a suspicious centimetre, thrust a blade of golden light across the layer of snow.

They entered a drinking den in which a fug of tobacco smoke hung like a mosquito net through the air. The old man introduced Davo to the company, around twenty men, mainly middle-aged together with a few over-cheery women. In the centre of each table in the lounge stood a bottle of Asbach Uralt, a brandy Davo particularly liked. Fascinating to him, men were playing cards using coins and banknotes. He was given a glass and told to pour for himself.

The events of that night - drunken banter varies little anywhere - are not important, save in two respects. Firstly, when Davo, in a show of drunken enthusiasm, slyly turned the conversation round to the flying visit of the CC - still the sensation of the villages - the outpouring of scorn amazed him.

"Lecherous old hypocrite!" yelled one.

"Drunken liar!" snarled another. "He decries the very liquor he himself drinks."

"*And* arranges another man to shoulder the blame! We are the little people, ours a tiny operation.....but *him!* We only trade for apples and asparagus."

"These are just rumours," countered Davo, braver now through the effect of the alcohol.

"No, young man! He organizes the trade he condemns." said a new voice hoarsely from a corner. "But big, big time!"

The host, a large bearded man in an apron, seeing matters getting out of control attempted to shush the last speaker, pointing at Davo - the soldier in their midst, which provoked both amusement and bemusement. The man who had brought him along proposed a toast - *to the virgin who is no more.*

"How can he report a crime which he himself commits?" the old rascal asked of the company, causing a general outburst of laughter.

The second significant event for Davo, as he pretended to find the notion as hilarious as his fellow boozers did, was a glimpse of a girl through a half drawn curtain who was passing in the next room with a jug, a glimpse just long enough for him to recognize the eyes which had so astonished him in the newspaper.

*

A day or two later, Davo, without correspondents since Giana had found her friend, was surprised to receive a letter. He did not recognize the handwriting on the envelope. He was even more surprised to unfold the piece of paper it contained and find himself looking at his own cheery face swigging from a brandy glass, with the bottle label clearly in view. There was no message but the meaning of the photograph was clear. He cursed himself for being so naïve. Quickly, he folded the paper, looking around at other soldiers and wondering how many of them had tumbled into the same bear pit. But there was something else in the envelope. A ten New Euro note. He was so shocked to see it that he held it in the open for longer than he should have done. Hoping that his neighbours had been preoccupied enough with their card games not to notice it, he strolled to the latrines and flushed the photo away. The money he kept. Later, it found its way surreptitiously into his Guards Handbook in which the Letter was concealed.

The wait - the deliberately prolonged wait for a second message, began to tell on him. He could hardly eat and sleep. His neighbours saw how ill he looked and Davo had the feeling that his new right-hand bunk neighbour, a man who spent hours polishing his boots, could penetrate his skull to read his guilt, and had been placed there on purpose to do it. Davo felt ill but his mind was intrigued by the opportunity it might be afforded to discover how deep - and how high! - corruption was running. He had never felt destined for great things, but if he could somehow make contact with important dissidents - of whatever stripe - then he could pass on what he knew and the proof of it. It would be a relief at least to be free of the burden or to share it. There was also another aspect which intrigued him; he kept seeing the beautiful and intelligent face of Oksima Salkis, a girl too intelligent to be deceived by an appeal to hand herself in to the authorities. He wanted to speak to her and ask about her contact with Neno Yensis and Rosima Solcis. And he wanted to tell her that he loved and desired her.

Then one evening after dinner about a week later, his torture came to an end. From the nonchalant hand of the mail-deliverer a second envelope sailed and landed on his bunk.

Davo,

You will send information to the address above to tell us when night patrols are due out in the forest and what tracks they will follow. Draw in route on enclosed copies of maps. You will have a good share!

Another ten Euro note fell out of the envelope. At this point he could and perhaps should have gone to throw himself on the generous mercy of the commandant.

Yet if he had, the Tyranny would doubtless have lasted for decades longer than it did. On such quirks history ever seems to enjoy turning.....

While his well-fed neighbours belched, bantered and betted, Davo lay on his bunk imagining a clever scenario which could see him emerge as not the villain but the hero. *Sir, I heard rumours of a drinking den in Kronau and allowed myself to be corrupted to deceive the brandy smugglers. They are trying to blackmail me into*

revealing to them when and where we shall patrol in the Old Forest. These crooks can be trapped! Let me be the viper in their nest! The plan made a lot of sense. He would emerge a saint, a true believer, a man with initiative. But an essential element, a virtue basic to such thinking, had disappeared that summer and autumn. Trust in Authority.

In the pleasantly warm barracks, where other men laughed and relaxed, poor Davo, the unlikely saviour of his nation, sweated cold sweat, seeing himself balancing on a narrow precipice with abysses on both sides. His safest descent would be to confess to the commandant just how weak and foolish he had been, in the hope that his punishment would be light. If his superior really was honest, and if the strategy which had occurred to Davo also occurred to him, then all might yet be well.

And then, the next morning - sensational developments. It was very cold on the parade ground. Breakfast had been postponed and the ranks of hungry men stood shivering under the earnest gaze of a noble-looking officer in a green greatcoat and sheepskin mittens. Davo was quite a way away from the podium but he saw that the man had a red eye. Instantly his gut told him that the news would not be good.

“This morning at six a.m. Commandant Benkis was relieved of his command and stripped of his rank. He has confessed to being a member of the Opposition. Brandy and alien books were discovered in his rooms. He has also admitted that agents of his clique are set in place among this company. Please be patient. Soon my men will have completed a search of your lockers for illegals. The innocent will then be allowed to break their fast.”

Davo saw many heads droop. He accepted with an awful resignation that the money and the letter in his locker meant that he would be amongst those whose fast would remain unbroken. His dazed attention was hauled back by the chill voice of the red-eyed man - as chill as the ice in the puddles and the coconut frost on the branches. His smaller acolyte, an ugly grinning man, was dramatically holding up brandy and cigarettes like trophies.

“Do not be afraid if you are not guilty” intoned the officer. “My men are already guarding your quarters to ensure your security and safety. These renegade smugglers and dissenters have nowhere to run. Names will be called. You must step forward two paces if you hear yours.”

An obsequious midget ran up the steps and, bowing deeply, handed the red-eyed man a sheaf of papers. Names were announced and their owners shuffled forward to be grabbed and moved like chessmen into a more prominent and shameful position by Green Guards. Through the first half of the alphabet, Davo Puskis waited to hear his name, grinding teeth and flexing muscles; as if hoping that his legs, paralysed by days of illness and weakness and now by terror, might suddenly be coaxed into a loping attempt at escape.....an escape, no doubt, into a bullet-riddled oblivion. At M he almost started forward, but when he heard the name Stamsis his knees almost buckled. But no-one saw. After Y there were no more names.

The red-eyed man took his time descending the podium, never taking his gaze from the steps. He walked along the rank of shamed men - Davo counted twenty-six of them - offering them, in mockery, cigarettes and a brandy bottle. All shook their heads, apart from Flenis, a tall and popular character - a jester in the barracks, who coolly drew out a cigarette from the packet. Instantly he was slapped around the cheek by the mitten of Red-Eye. Flenis did not flinch.

“I smell tobacco on *you*, Sir.” he said simply. “I thought you were being honest - as honest as me.”

Red-Eye nodded strangely to no-one and a shot rang out. The cigarette span out of that brave mouth and that huge, handsome soldier, murdered by a tiny shell, fell forward onto the frozen grit. In a country where Death had become such a rare beast - mainly spiriting away the grateful old - it was truly shocking for those young soldiers to see Him feast on one of theirs.

His murderer re-ascended the podium, as nonchalantly as if he had just squashed a pest. The murderer reassured the men that if the men who were innocent cooperated with the bloody murderer in upholding the integrity of their regiment, then all would be well. The murderer spoke of courage, vigilance, responsibility and loyalty. The men listened to the murderer and said not a word - as millions of their forebears have done down the ages when cowed by the Evil of a single king, warlord or exploiter - all murderers. The men could have risen up and overpowered Red-Eye there and then but it did not occur to any of them, there and then, to do it. Because they were not a body of men, but lonely individuals each afraid to die. And Davo, poor shivering, knowledge-burdened Davo, was no better.

The corpse was carried away efficiently. Red-Eye waited and then called the line of miscreants as many vile names as he could think of. Men trembled, men wept - all young men, hardly more than children. When the terms of abuse had been exhausted, they were herded away, not to be seen again. To the ranks of the good he promised great things - once the emergency was over.

“Do not be afraid. Regrettably - please understand - the whole company must be confined to barracks until further notice. Your dormitories will be guarded day and night to ensure your wellbeing. There will be instruction and supervised leisure activities. As soon as we are sure that the very last Oppositionist hiding like a coward amongst you has been rooted out, all privileges will be restored.”

*

An interminable wait for nothing ensued. Four grim soldiers in great coats, holding bayoneted rifles, sat north, east, south and west around the periphery of the room. Association was forbidden. Men read, listened to the radio or lay staring at the ceiling. Dingy light faded away and long, long hours of darkness later, it grudgingly returned, even dingier.

Davo was polishing his boots one afternoon when he heard his name announced. A new guard, dressed in darker green was approaching, boots clicking. He had absurd grey side whiskers and dark eyes.

“Puskis. You are to follow me.”

Davo looked around at the horrified faces, certain he would never see them again. Fearing on the first day that he might be searched on his way to the latrines, as some men had been, he had decided not to flush away the two banknotes and the letter, and had slipped them into a packet of stale biscuits his aunt had sent weeks earlier. If they rooted through his locker again, he felt sure they would be found. He crossed the foggy parade ground and was ushered into the office where he had requested his transfer. It was hard for Davo to believe that the beautiful man in the chair opposite was capable of terrible cruelty. His face creased in a smile but his eyes remained aloof.

“We asked ex-Commandant Benkis who in his company he suspected of subversion and amongst others, he mentioned you.”

The bookshelves were empty. On the table was a file. Poor Davo was not sure whether he was supposed to speak or remain silent. He remained silent because he

could not speak. Red-Eye flicked through the pages nodding to himself in approval. "Your record his impeccable. No drunken fist-fights...no late returns from Kronau or Zendau...no insubordination.....*Too* impeccable? Can you explain why Benkis would give up your name?"

Because you had him tortured, you bastard.

"I am truly astonished, Sir. First of all, what is subversion? A word I do not know."

"Really? You are a Beta, almost a Beta Plus and have never met this word? Were you away from school when the Stalinist period in Russia was studied?"

It was a stupid miscalculation to play the naïve idiot. The officer leant forward and slowly explained what men guilty of subversion did.

"They think wrong thoughts, say wrong things under their breath and do wrong things behind the backs of decent men. Wrong is the opposite of right, the opposite of the Idea. Now do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir! Thank you Sir! So Flenis was a subversive - he was rude to you."

He realised he had overegged his Stupid Pudding again. Flenis had been many things, but never a subversive. The officer had a keen instinct and ear for deceit. He shook his head very slowly, never taking his wide blue eyes, with their crimson flaw, from Davo.

"No, Flenis was only rude and stupid. But, apart from that, is it not remarkable that you know the word *subversive* but not subversion? Intriguing."

He picked up a pen and jotted a word or two on the file. Davo felt a bead of sweat trickle from his armpit. It was time to take the initiative.

"I stood here just over a week ago, Sir, to ask...*Benkis*...for a transfer to the City. That was the one and only time I spoke to him. I cannot understand why he would describe me in those terms. Is it subversion to ask plainly for a transfer?"

"No.....Possibly.....Benkis told me under rigorous - but fair - interrogation that he did not trust your show of ingenuousness." He picked up a sheet of paper and read aloud - *Puskis made over-enthusiastic comments about the Chief Coordinator. Underlying that, I detected a wily lack of respect for our great leader.*

Davo pulled as astonished a face as he could and declared that no-one admired the Leader more than he.

"Please Sir, I am delighted that he has taken charge. We need a strong Leader at this time."

The newcomer examined him for insincerity as his predecessor had done. Davo was on the verge of exposing the drinking den but he waited to see if he needed to.

"Why would Benkis mention you?"

"Why? Well, if he is a traitor, Sir, whose name would he try to blacken the most? A man of his own persuasion or a Loyalist?"

Red-Eye, of course knew the background. He had been in the cellar when electrical wires had been clipped to Benkis's testicles. The secretary had barely been able to keep up with the roll-call of names spilling from his screaming mouth.

"A Loyalist? But that is precisely the devious reply I would expect of a devious man," he drawled, leaning back lazily in his chair. "You can only persuade me to alter my opinion of you by giving me the names of those comrades who you have seen or overheard being subversive."

Davo protested that he was not sociable. "Ask my fellows. I go out seldom. I read or listen to my radio."

"What do you read?"

"My handbook. And I have a book of birds. I am an amateur ornithologist."

"You are a loner."

“I am.”

“Exactly the kind of man who I would not trust.”

Davo was almost in genuine tears with exasperation. He was lost in a crazy world where there were no longer any simple right answers.

“But, Sir, you - we - cannot suspect all of our countrymen. There has to be trust.”

“There was trust, Puski. Yensis and his ilk destroyed trust. Not I! Now you must listen in your corner of the dormitory for the grumblers. Come now. I know you are afraid and have been pretending to be less clever than you are. In your boots I would do the same. Your academic record is excellent. You are exactly the kind of man to listen for subversion between the lines. As soon as you suspect someone, you will inform a Green Guard. Now go.”

The soldier with the grey whiskers took him back to the barracks.

As he was escorted back, Davo realised that the new regime had inadvertently protected him - for the time being. The severing of all contact and communication between the army post and the villages would persuade his blackmailers that Davo had no way of sending them maps. In any case, patrols were being carried out by those Greenies - as they were being called in whispers - for the present. It would therefore be futile to betray him. But he knew he could not remain at the camp. He had no information to reveal about his fellow soldiers, and would not stoop to invent any. Before long, Red-Eye would arrest him, for no better reason than he could. If they found or beat out of him the information he had - and read the letter in which a red-eyed villain was mentioned - then it would be fatal.

That evening they had eaten in silence and returned to their bunks. Davo took a biscuit and slipped the letters and money into his trousers while a Greenie was dealing with a toilet request. Soon, he would ask too for the toilet when the queue had shortened. One man at a time was the rule, even though there were twenty cabinets.

“Be quick” ordered the guard like an automaton.

“I’ll try,” said Davo “Without exercise, brother, I am constipated.”

“Do you complain about your treatment, soldier?”

“No, no.”

He smiled but there was not a flicker of response in the other man. He hurried in and closed a door. Here, in that stinking hole, was the only privacy to be had. It was a relief to drop the shredded money and maps into the water. He was re-reading Rosima’s letter, prior to shredding it too, when a great thump at the door made him jump from the seat.

“Come on, soldier. If you can’t shit now, you will wait until tomorrow.”

He went to tear the letter but saw Rosima’s dead, pleading eyes. His hands refused. Cursing them, he stuffed it into his shorts and pulled the chain.

The night was the longest of the year, the twenty-first of December. The guards had tiny lamps like nurses might have; the beds were in darkness. The silence was disturbed by infrequent whispered requests for the toilet. Davo did a tour in his head of every nook of the building, trying to work out how to escape. There was no easy way. He would need luck. He would go at the next breakfast. If he was caught, it would not matter. To stay one more day there would be impossible. If necessary, he would cut the same artery as Rosima’s with the knife he had smuggled out of the mess and spent hours honing on the iron bed frame.

At breakfast, with so many men queuing, seating themselves and leaving the canteen, it was impossible for just four Greenies to keep tabs on everything. Four others were

always present at meal times, and paradoxically this made them all relax more than usual. Holding his belly, Davo approached the guard he knew was the most humane and said he was ill. The one who had hurried him the previous night overheard and sneered "He can't shit." then turned away.

"I need to try to go, please." said Davo to the other.

"Right - be as quick as you can."

As he walked past the queue for the counter and on past the closed door which gave access to the kitchen, he stooped down to do up a bootlace. With no-one behind him, he tried the door -and prayed - and it opened! He slipped through and crawled under a long table where food was standing plated. Two cooks were so absorbed in the furious row they were having over an eggy mess on the floor that they had no idea he was there. The outside door was ten metres away. Suddenly, it opened wide and a villager shouldering a great net of potatoes entered. The blast of fresh, chill air was a delight to Davo's nostrils, exposed for days and days to an atmosphere polluted by frightened men. The villager dumped his load on a counter and treated himself to some free entertainment as the two ladle-wielding old women went toe to toe. Davo reached up to a peg and took down a smock and a cap. In seconds he was ready. When the villager laughed out loud, the two women vented their anger on him and Davo grabbed a hessian recycling sack and nipped out into the frosty and foggy half light. He whistled his way towards the skips behind the blockhouse. Fortunately, he was wearing his thick jumper, otherwise he could never have withstood the cold. Any time soon the alarm would be raised when the guard recalled that he had not returned from the latrines. A large dray and a patient horse stood nearby. Orange nets of potatoes had been offloaded and now sacks like his were being tossed onto the dray by two men. Davo went around on their blind side and as soon as there was a decent heap he climbed up and pulled them around him. The odour of peelings was only just bearable. Davo thought of happier times for distraction and could hardly believe it when the dray lurched forward with the potato man holding the reins. He closed his eyes and counted slowly to three hundred. When he peeked out again it was to see, not the grit of the parade ground, but trees and undergrowth. A wooden sign, just legible in the dawn murk, pointed to KRONAU and ZENDAU. He stuck up his head and saw the two loaders sitting on the back edge of the dray sharing a loaf of bread. He knew it would need split-second timing to avoid them seeing him after he had rolled off. He almost decided to stay on until the village but someone would surely have worked out how he had escaped, and even now the pursuit of the slow dray might be in progress. Having walked into Kronau a few times, he knew that in a few minutes the dray would have to slow for the junction where the right turn led to Zendau two miles further on. The vehicle slowed and Davo made ready. When it stopped, he rolled off and kept rolling until he was five metres into the woods. He shook a branch and snow fell onto the scrape his body had made. He lay and watched the freezing breath of the two men evaporate and heard their laughter fade. He waited for as long as he could stand the cold and then forced himself to hang on while he counted again to three hundred. A buzzing noise grew louder and there were great lights growing larger too. He watched amazed as five motorized bicycles ridden by Greenies wooshed past. When silence reigned again - apart from the plaints of the lonely crows - he jogged further into the forest gloom, knowing exactly at which house he would emerge.

Oksima Salkis

"Open this door. Guards!"

The wood smoke in the village had thickened the fog, making it a perfect ally for Davo. He hammered again at that door which he had last seen a fortnight ago by night. A curtain twitched. A reluctant key turned. The door opened a wary centimetre.

“What do you want? It’s barely nine o’clock!”

“I am Davo Puskis. You are blackmailing me, you bastard. I need to see the old man who brought me here from the tavern. It was dominoes night. I was photographed drinking brandy.”

“Blackmail? You have no business here. Go away.”

Davo put his boot in the door. He knew, he said, that Oksima Salkis was in hiding there. He would report this to the new commandant if he was sent away.

“I have nothing to lose. I am a wanted man myself. I am on your side and need your help.”

A head - the large bearded head of the host - popped out of a top window and stared past Davo into the yellow fog. It finally looked down at the shivering refugee and recognized him. The door chain came off and Davo almost fell into the room and rushed to the log fire.

“No!” ordered the host, whose name was Berno “Stay near the door and move in gradually. I will fetch a blanket.”

Another man, a shrewd man of about sixty, sat smoking in an armchair and reading the paper. Without looking up he said matter-of-factly “If this is a trick and they come here, you will be killed and buried in the forest. We are looking out for them from upstairs at this very moment...”

Davo assured him it was no ploy - he was suspected of being an Oppositionist and had had to escape. The man continued to read as if he had not heard his reply. As Davo edged towards the blaze, an old woman came in with hot milk and he gripped the bowl eagerly in his blue and white fingers.

“What kind?” asked the seated man.

“What kind of what?”

“What kind of Oppositionist? A criminal opportunist like us - or one of those idiots in the woods who think they can overthrow Gorkis?”

What should he say?

“Both.”

The man looked up and laughed. “You cannot be both! Like God and Satan in one!”

The anger Davo had been suppressing since the death of Flenis erupted “Why not? I hate Gorkis. He is a drunk and a liar. A man of no principle. He wishes to keep the Trade to himself and his cronies, away from the country folk who only want a little more for themselves. And a little fun. Yes, I am both - and proud to be!”

“Well spoken!” said the young woman at the door with the blanket, the woman with the astonishing eyes. She draped the blanket around him and with the corners pulled him nearer to the fire. He fingered the letter in his pocket and wondered whether it was time to show it. *Not yet*. First, he must prove his goodwill.

“You should ship in as much contraband in as you can before the confinement to barracks is lifted. These Greenies are all City boys. They do not know the forest. The fog will stay for days. I know, because I am a farm boy.”

The man by the fire laughed. “You are a *naïve* boy. As we sit around here, Gorkis’s little green men are bringing in gear from Germany - gadgets, phones, cameras, watches, booze, fashions, cosmetics - and currency - all for the Elite. That is why your honest old commandant was shot. That is why you are all going rotten in the barracks. The villages are finished. Nothing to do here now but kick sheep shit and drink cloudy beer.”

“So, the Idea *is* dead...” murmured Davo with sadness.

“The Idea! A bad dream, you mean. You can never make folk better than they are born. The forest wolves will never stop eating sheep and go over to mushrooms. Yes, the idea is dead - and in its place a worse nightmare than the Old Time. And Gorkis will become a worse tyrant than Stalin or Hitler, mark my words. Drink your milk. We will give you gloves and a coat. Then you must go, before the fog thins.”

Oksima came and stood defiantly in front of the seated man. “Andio, he is one of us. He is a farm boy.”

Turning to Davo, she dazzled him with those beautiful dark - almost black eyes and asked him where he was from.

“From Denzau.”

The man by the fire looked up in wonder. “You are a Puski from *Denzau*? The son of Doula and Kalo Puski??”

“The same. I found him dead.”

“Then you will know how he died! *I* know. Do you??”

“The doctor told us it was a congestion of the lung which his weak heart could do nothing about.”

Instantly, the distrustful man sprang up and grabbed Davo’s shoulder, sending milk into the air.

“Your father gave me work in the Old Time when my loved ones were starving. Years before you were born. I am Andio Markis!” He turned to the host and Oksima and, eyes brimming, declared “This man *is* a good man. I vouch for him.”

There came a hammering at the door in a pattern of long and short thumps. Oksima leapt to open it and embraced the steam-panting man who entered. Davo’s heart sank. The great fellow peered past her head quizzically at Davo .

“He is a friend,” she said “Absconder from Station Kronau. A man we can trust. This is my man, Ano. Look, he has been to the traps! Rabbit stew for dinner.”

Ano came forward and shyly shook Davo’s warming hand, almost crushing it. Davo decided he could like him in spite of what he was.

Two days later Ano did not return from his traps and, a week later, was found half showcased by a frozen stream, with a gunshot hole where his nose had been. His body was laid in an outhouse and a screaming Oksima was prevented from seeing it. She tried to remain brave by day but Davo listened in agony to her grieving night after night in the room next to hers. He was falling asleep one night when he woke to find her standing over him, her face pale and furious in the moonlight.

“We must make a proper Opposition, Davo. I am not going to let them shoot *me* like a rabbit. There are rebels near the border. I am going to find them and join them.”

She turned and closed the door.

At dawn he slipped a note under her door - a note he had laboured over most of the night.

Oksima, I know you better than you think. I know you saved Neno Yensis’s life in the forest. I know you spoke to Guardian Rosima Solcis. I know you tell the truth. I admire you. I am so sorry about Ano.

She did not come out of her room that morning and downstairs Davo kept waiting for the stairs door to open. The old woman, the sister of Andio Markis, took her a bowl of soup but returned with it untouched.

“The poor child has cried herself to sleep” she said. “Sleep will do her more good

than soup.”

That night Davo was reading when there came a light tap at his door. The girl stood there, wept out and exhausted. Her eyes had lost their intensity (and they never did quite get it back.)

“I need to speak to you. Put more logs on the fire.”

She sat on the edge of the bed. Trembling almost, Davo stacked up the grate and looked round at her.

“You *are* a spy!” she exclaimed, hissing like a gorgeous black-eyed swan.

“No! A friend! A good friend.”

“But you know things you should not know” she retorted, flinging the ball of paper he had written into the fire. “How could you know these things unless you know Venegis, the man with the red eye - who frightened my father half to death? If I’d given that note to Markis, he would have had you strangled.”

“Dear Oksima - you are adding two different things together and getting the wrong answer.”

“Then explain how you know what you know!”

Davo had no longer a choice. Brushing past her, he took the bloodied letter from a drawer and handed it over.

“Take it to the light of the fire. Then it can easily be read.”

She sat in the armchair and he watched her eyes move rapidly right and left, pausing occasionally. They finished reading and grew wider.

“How did you come by this?” she said after a while.

“I was a guard in the Dome. I found Rosima’s body before Gorkis’s men got to her. She told my comrade to take the letter in her final breath. I took it from him. He was blamed for the murder. God knows where he is now. It is such a relief to share this knowledge with someone...to share it with you. Don’t you see? This proves that the true opposition to the Idea is led by Gorkis himself!”

She put the letter back into the envelope.

“I knew Yensis was innocent but dared not tell anyone. Now we share something important” she said simply. “When we have...*buried* Ano, we should try to find Devenskis and his sons in the Old Forest.”

“Who?”

“You have never heard of Kalo Devenskis and his torment?”

She told him of the atrocity which had befallen that man’s wife in October. They had lived in Spendau, forty kilometres away, and she was a devout Christian*.

One evening, a house meeting of co-believers had been interrupted by a drunken gang of Green Guards who had killed the men and strangled all the women after raping them.

“The soldiers were disciplined. They tried to hush it up. But of course, all the villages knew, even if the City did not. And you wonder why I did not give myself up during the trial? I saw what an evil man Venegis was, in spite of his sweet smile. I knew in my bones what was coming! We all did.”

“And what happened to the husband?”

“He fled with his teenage sons into the forest. Slogans have begun to appear in some of the villages. JOIN THE TRUE OPPOSITION.”

*Religion, though not encouraged by the Idea, had been tolerated, in the expectation that the long Wholesome Life would one day eradicate the fear of death - Yensis.)

“Not here though.”

“Not yet.”

“But how can they oppose? With what?”

“Devenskis was the village schoolmaster - an intellectual - he knows languages. We heard that he is trying to make contact with those over the border who love our Idea and hate the insanities in their own countries.”

“But what will they use as weapons?”

She told him she did not know the answers, that asking too many questions was unwise. She looked again at the envelope and said that if the letter could fall into the hands of a clever man, he ought to be able to find a way to undermine Gorkis.

“I have no idea. I am not that clever and know nobody important.”

Davo begged her not to tell the others about it. It was not that he mistrusted them, but that it was best kept a secret.

“If one of them is interrogated, then they will confess it.”

She agreed. Sitting back and sliding a little down into the armchair she stared into the fire. New flames were licking at the logs and playfully flickering on her face and in her hair which was, unusually for our country, streaked with Scandinavian blonde. Her lips parted as she gazed into her placid misery, and it did not occur to her to bother about that strange detriment to her face. Davo loved her lack of conceit and felt depressed. He was not very tall and not very handsome. He knew this elegant creature was beyond his reach, both in her beauty and her grief. Her eyes closed and she slept. He tiptoed to the armchair with a blanket and let it settle over her. She stirred but did not wake. When he woke the fire was embers and she had gone.

That morning the fog cleared. There emerged first a low sun and then an evenly blue sky. Oksima came down in a grey greatcoat and announced that she was going to look in the traps. She stared at Davo so meaningfully that he offered to go with her. He borrowed a greatcoat and a fur hat with a chin strap. They entered the wood together and their eyes adjusted to the gloom.

“This was the way he came.” she said more to herself than Davo and he knew he was not meant to reply. She stumbled over a root hidden in the snow and reached out for his hand. When she was steady, Davo withdrew his own in modesty but she gripped it tight in her mitten. In a pensive silence they walked on, and the bleak whistles of the starlings seemed to speak their thoughts for a while.

“Davo,” she said finally “Why are we still cruel to each other? Are there not enough dangers in the world? We have earthquakes. Children can drown in a forest pool. Tree branches can crack and fall on us. Our own hearts may stop beating. For millions of years we are in the frozen darkness. We come to the light and warmth only for a few years. Why make enemies? Should we not protect each other like true brothers and sisters?”

He told her shyly about his Aunt Luza and her bible, how in the first chapter a jealous farmer had killed his own brother and hidden the body.

“I heard the story when I was a child.” she replied. “What a sad people we are.”

“But why were you and your parents not content just to farm and eat what they grew? Why was I not happy just to drink wine? We always want more. Like Adam and Eve.”

They came to a part of the track where she knew the first trap lay to the left, having been out with Ano many times. The stream which babbled like a child in the spring and summer was hushed by ice, and where Ano’s body had been hacked out, a layer

of fresh snow was already making good the breach.

“Ano was a lovely, simple man,” she said. “Why would they shoot him? For rabbits?” She knelt down and inspected the tangled white grasses for any sign of him.

“Perhaps they thought he was a smuggler.....Even when we die we leave so few marks.....”

She began to tremble with anguish and Davo pulled her to her feet. She said he was a good friend.

“Oksima, there is no hope here. We should walk back in case the snow comes again.”

“No! I want to see *all* the traps.”

An hour passed and they found nothing. As they approached the farmhouse, something made Davo pause. A cry. A familiar cry to a soldierly ear like his. An order. They heard a low rumble like a dirty chuckle in response to a joke in poor taste. They smelt sweet fumes. At the side of the house stood something they had seen only in picture books. A truck. A truck with the ugliest face either had ever clapped eyes on. Crouching down behind the drape of a fir tree, they watched as, one by one, hands raised, their three companions were marched out of the back door and made to climb into the back of the thing. The old woman could not manage and was picked up and thrown in. Then, a new sound came, like female laughter; the tinkle of breaking glass. Smoke began to pour out of windows.....pursued by flames. The crates of brandy which had been stacked near the truck were lifted in, and away it roared, as if this was the best joke it had ever heard.

“The letter!” shouted Davo, leaping up and out past the tree. As he raced to the house Oksima caught up and like a great cat jumped on his back, bringing him down. He protested and struggled but she was incredibly strong. From a pocket she dragged the envelope and stuffed into his mouth almost. He calmed down, but looked at her in amazement.

“It’s alright! I didn’t trust Wensis. I found him near your room this morning.”

“Him with the beard? Berno?”

“Yes. I didn’t like the look of him. I saw in his piggy eyes he knew we were finished. Call it second-sight.”

“You think he betrayed us?”

“Somebody did. Not the old woman for sure.”

They waited and watched the fire taking hold. No-one came out to watch from the village in the vale. No-one came to put it out. Everyone understood the message it was sending out with the flames and the smoke and stayed in their kitchens. Davo took her hand and asked her if she felt strong enough to walk through the forest to his native village, to Denzau.

“My sister will hide us. It is a good twenty kilometres. We should go now.”

They watched a whole side wall crumble and fall and the roof start to slide.

“Well, I cannot return to Zendau, “ said Oksima.. “And I cannot stay here. I’d better follow you.”

* * *

I had dozed off in the warm afternoon. My sweet Jula looked up from her table and stretched. She showed me what she had written on her own of Oksima and Davo, and I approved. She brought me coffee and said she thought we ought to leave the couple there for a time, making their painful way through the winter woods, like children in a fairy tale from long ago. I agreed.

Having married in Denzau, they decided to postpone their quest to find the

schoolmaster, his sons and their allies until Oksima's name and face had faded somewhat from the attention of the authorities. Over the next few years, though sought and hunted by the Green Guards, Devenskis and his men became as elusive and almost as legendary as an ancient band of English outlaws of a different stripe of green. We decided we would pick up their heroic story, as well as Oksima's and Davo's, at a later point.

Confined

Of my years in solitary confinement I will say little. It is beyond my skill as a writer to bring such a dead time to life. And you only need use your imagination. I did not thank the judges and Mero Gorkis for sparing me a firing squad. I was experiencing a living death far worse than the awful anticipation of execution and the countdown of seconds to the swift pang of a bullet - and then oblivion. *That* time would have been as mercifully quick as sand slipping through an hour glass. *This* time was as cruelly slow as the drips of a tap from a deep well.

I had my radio and my paper in that flatlet - but all independent action - such as cooking and writing - was denied me. I am not an angry man as a rule, but I became more and more infuriated by the idiotic propaganda broadcasts featuring Gorkis in person, scaremongering and blaming me for his repressive measures. His nasal voice was demoralising enough - he kept clearing his hoarse throat like a brandy drinker and smoker - and it was high-pitched and somehow self-pitying, like a child's. In addition to his and all the other unendurable stupid voices, the great German, Czech and English music I treasured began to give way to popular tunes and folk ditties. My morale sank to such a low point that I threw the radio at the wall and trashed my flat. I had already heard reports about rebels being *hunted down* in the forest, but could not decide if they were Ideologues or criminals. I found myself now even taking the part of the latter. I would not hear the name Kalo Devenskis or Davo Puskis for many years. One morning - I forget even which month it was or even which season - my door sprang open. The flat was needed to accommodate a family, I was told. I was being taken deeper to a new cell block which had been excavated deeper in the Vault.

Although the corridors I descended with my hands unnecessarily tied behind my back were well - even too well lit - it felt like a march into hell. Finally, I found myself in front of a door painted a cruel sky blue. The walls inside were whitewashed and the cell equipped with a two bunks left and right and a sink and a toilet bowl across which a screen could be pulled for privacy. There was a bookshelf but I had no books. My paper and pencils had been taken away and my avenues of escape would have to be memory and imagination.

On the first of every month - I became a counting human calendar - an examination was accorded to me and a silent creature purporting to be a doctor was brought in to check for signs of mental and physical deterioration. My every enquiry as to conditions - even the weather outside - was ignored. My determination not to allow my enemies to gloat over any decline in my health caused me to do press-ups in the space between the bunks and to write short stories and poetry in my head. At school we had read of the Scholls, a brother and sister in Munich who in a previous age of tyranny had opposed their oppressors and paid with their young lives. I made up conversations with them and went off on their adventures, daubing walls and scattering leaflets.

One October day, the tenth, my birthday, I received a visit from an old acquaintance I had never met. He wore a dark green greatcoat and smiled affably. On his lower left

eyelid there was a rose bud, a birthmark in red. Dismissing the warder, he sat down on the bunk opposite and slowly unwound the scarf from his neck. I deduced that, because of Andia's outburst in committee, he would be aware that I knew of him and of his manipulation of her - she had, after all, described his eye, his most distinctive feature. Even so, I decided to pretend that I had no idea who he was and even asked him his name. He pretended not to have heard and asked me if I was comfortable in my new surroundings. I ignored his question like he had mine. His reaction was unpleasant. Still smiling he said "You are a disgrace to your calling, Yensis. I would have not have imprisoned you. I would have had you shot. But a higher authority, a man of great wisdom and mercy had you spared."

I kept my anger under control. "Well," I replied. "I can only say that I am glad you think me a lucky man to be living in such luxury after all my misdeeds. If you have only come to gloat, whoever you are, then I would grateful to have my solitude restored."

He said nothing but made for the door - then dallied, as if to say, unlike me, he had a choice. My upper arms were strong from my exercising. This man was weedy - I looked at his pale throat and imagined how easy it would be to throttle him. One corrupt man less. He turned from the cell door and from a pocket he took out a letter, closed his eyes and pointed at his birth mark. I got the message. The letter he wafted around like a trophy or bait.

"You are a very subtle man" I said, and he laughed.

"Your famous low sarcasm cuts no ice with me, Yensis."

"Likewise for me your very amateur dramatics. State your business and go. I'm a busy man.If you enjoy seeing me humiliated, why not have a glass case built and display me in public?"

"Don't be foolish..."

"No! I could be a living exhibit - to scare the children into behaving. Put me in the Central Park."

He took out another piece of paper, cleared his throat and read.

"By order of the Emergency Committee it is decided that the solitary confinement of the criminal Neno Yensis shall be ended. That is all. Space is required as more wreckers and renegades come to light. You should be pleased to have companions from now on."

"Delighted. Will men be chosen whose stupidity will drive me mad? You know what Sartre said about hell and other people? Or are you too narrowly read?"

"I couldn't care less. Your sarcasm has absolutely no effect on me. But I am here to tell you plainly this - if you protest your innocence to anyone or invent stories about the competent authorities then a person with whom you once had a relationship will have all her privileges withdrawn. And her father who is very ill may have treatment withheld. Here."

He tossed me the letter he had placed on the bunk and went. I tore open the envelope and read the contents with shaking hand and racing heart. She wrote in that tiny hand of hers that she was married to a teacher and had a young son. She begged me to say nothing of what we had experienced together - in the forest or the City. I tore the letter into shreds and flushed it away.

To my surprise, after my meagre dinner of soup and grey bread, the red-eyed man returned, fanning the air to express his disgust at the salty smell. He leant against the wall and asked whether I understood exactly what was required of me.

"Of course - but it is absurd. Who would get out of here to spread my lies? Why do you worry?"

“I do not have to explain this decision. I did not take it. I must pass it on and you must obey it”

Had he only come back to savour my despair over Andia’s news? I saw there was no reason any longer to pretend I did not know who he was.

“Who killed Rosima Curcis and Luzo Gorkis? And why? Why did you have Andia Pugis spy on me?”

Now he hesitated at the door for a different reason, torn between the prudence of keeping a secret and the pleasure of divulging it. Or so I thought. I urged him to tell me, assuring him that what he might say would come under the same restraint as the truth about our experience in the forest.

“And who would ever believe me if I said that they were killed by.....the authorities? Did Rosima discover the truth about the smugglers? Did Luzo get too greedy?”

He revelled in his privilege of knowledge so much that his ugly eye twinkled, the lid had grown redder. I felt the enormous malice of the man, taking pleasure in depriving me of what I wanted most. He took another step to the door and stopped again. I stood up.

“You are debating with yourself which would be the most exquisite torture - to deny me the truth - or to leave me with a truth which would be unbearable - because I could not pass it on or act on it. You are a see-through man. A man of no compassion. Nobody ever loved you. I pity you - you have a prison all of your own. At least I was loved.”

“I have told you, Yensis, your barbs have no effect on me. I do my duty and that is the only reward I require.....You think yourself so superior! You and your famed intelligence! You fool! You misjudged Luzo Gorkis completely. It should have been him who was nicknamed the evangelist.”

“But it was he - surely - who used his name and influence to have me spied on by you! If not him, then who?”

I was back at the committee table, looking round at the faces looking at me, most in admiration, a few with sceptical dislike. Luzo’s was the last face, pasty-skinned as one who never went into the sun, sad and watery eyed.

“It is true,” said my tormentor simply. “He denounced you to the Vigilance Committee I sat on.”

“You were on Vigilance?”

“Yes, and since then - by my vigilance and diligence - due to my success in exposing you and the nest of vipers you controlled, I have risen. I am proud to have risen to be Mero Gorkis’s special security advisor.”

“Hold on”.....(My head was in a haze - I tried to put events into order). “He must have denounced me when.....”

When, when, when?

“.....When he realised that you were, Yensis, in spite of all your fine words for the Idea, the worst of hypocrites. Why did you constantly oppose his arguments for greater discipline and more supervision of the people? He *knew* you visited family in Pernau, not far from the very area where smuggling had been exposed. Why were you such a liberal - so flippant about his worries that the people were becoming idle and corrupted?? He knew you sister Hela was in Logistics. It all made sense. On my recommendation, Miss Pugis came onto your committee.”

“Your recommendation? You blackmailed her! Wait a minute...where you responsible for the death of Loikis, the young man she replaced? Was he pushed out of the window?”

He disdained to answer, only saying that he had always done his duty, unlike me. He

wished me a pleasant evening, consulting the ostentatious watch on his wrist. "Wait!" I shouted to his slinking back "Do you really expect me to believe that you had Luzo Gorkis killed because he was *good*?" The door had swung shut. He opened the grille and said "Really, Mr Yensis! Do you never cease being disingenuous?" "I confessed, didn't I? DIDN'T I?" But he was gone. I looked wildly around the cell for an edge, a corner on which I might bash out my suffering brains. Taking a deep breath, I screamed as loud as I could. There were rapid footsteps and the grille opened again. The tiny eyes and snub nose of the warder appeared. "You ill, Yensis?" "Who is that man?" "Leno Venegis. They say he might be the next Chief Co when Mero Gorkis retires." How could he be? He was twenty years too young. The whole system - as beautiful as an orrery - had been dismantled.

Devenskis

(This account is adapted from his testimony to The Great Enquiry before his death - Statement 23)
Jula Polankis

We did not go to the village hall to watch the screened court proceedings in the case of The State versus Neno Yensis. My wife Nanya had discovered a lump in her breast and the anxiety caused thereby was a ready excuse to ignore the none too subtle pressure on the villagers to attend. We were both already convinced of Neno's innocence. I knew his junior school teacher Vena Yensis (not related) and years before his arrest she had mentioned more than once what a handsome man of principle her favourite pupil had blossomed into, and what a great Chief Coordinator he would make. She was beside herself when he was arrested and wrote indignantly to the Co. Committee to protest. The day she was taken into custody, I knew for certain what we were facing. This coincided with the arrival of the New Guards in their green uniforms, our supposed protectors. Two were posted on my school *to watch over the children* but I suspected that they really there to eavesdrop on what teachers were saying. The two men smelt of tobacco and alcohol on many a morning. The children complained to me, but in whispers, as if they too understood somehow that the time for straight-speaking had passed. But when they complained, what could I say? One morning, the taller guard, a great stupid effort, was obviously still drunk from the previous night and I contacted the new commandant. His adjutant, a runt of a man, come down to investigate, ordered the soldier back to barracks and apologized to me, though less than unreservedly, and I understood my card had been marked for a second time following our non-attendance at the trial show - or the show trial. Shortly afterwards, my wife received an anonymous letter *from a friend* advising her not to call a prayer meeting at our house for a while as the local authorities were considering a ban on private assembly in view of *the emergency*. Nanya, of course, being as stubborn as a mule on a rainy day, threw the letter into the fire. She was damned if she would be intimidated! *A friend! Satan told Jesus he was his friend!* That Wednesday evening, the evening of her prayer meeting, I went with my sons Temyo and Berno to the chess club at the village hall. We returned at ten to find a scene of appalling slaughter. A crude note announced to me how sweet revenge was and I instantly guessed who the ringleader had been. I told my distraught sons to be

brave, that this was a new time and their mama would want them to fight for what was right. While they gathered a few necessary things I covered her over and then we walked off through the night, deeper and deeper into the forest, never stopping until just before dawn. It took me a while to find it, but there at last, by a stream and overgrown, stood the hunting lodge where my father had taken me trapping and fishing thirty years earlier. It had been stoutly built and was relatively sound. We built a fire in the grate from dry wood to keep smoke to a minimum and fell to sleep. It was hard that first chill winter. Throughout the autumn we gathered all the fruits and nuts we could find. The old wire gins were still lying underneath the lodge and we trapped squirrels and a few rabbits for smoking in the rafters. We part-dammed the stream and imprisoned a clan of brown trout. For the spring we had taken with us seeds of carrots and parsnips to sow on the banks of the stream. We got by. By early summer, my sons grew impatient. They were sixteen and nearly eighteen. They kept on until they persuaded me to give my blessing to them trekking separately into the villages to collect news and daub slogans calling for rebellion. Their late returns convinced me often that they had been taken but they always made it back, often with supplies they had acquired. The contacts they made with people they judged trustworthy began to bear fruit and by ones and twos our numbers increased. The stories of disappearances, injustices and even atrocities which newly recruited men and women told convinced us that our rebellion could only grow. But we needed weapons. It was early in July that we had a stroke of luck. On his way back from the distant village of Kronau, my elder son Temyo made a detour to avoid a party of Green Guards and as he pushed his way through dense undergrowth he came upon a near-perfect shelter made of a wooden framework covered with fir branches. Temyo kept watch for the forest dweller to return but was astonished to find himself gripped from behind and pinned to the floor in an instant.

“Who are you? A spy?” snarled his assailant in a rural accent. “Speak the truth or I will snap your neck like a rotten branch.”

Trapped in a headlock, Temyo was tasting dirt and wondering by how much the pressure on his neck would have to increase before the vertebra gave way. He took a breath and protested that he was a fugitive, a villager from Spendau where his mother had been raped and strangled by drunken Guards. While the man straddling him was making up his mind, Temyo recalled a tale he had heard in a village of a deserter from Station Kronau who was fabled to be living wild in the woods. His nickname was the ghost. For a ghost, this man was immensely powerful and my son realised that to struggle against the headlock would not only be futile, but fatal.

“If you decide to kill me, can you give my father Kalo and my brother Berno a sign? They will worry. They are living birdfree about twenty kilometres from the border, north of here by a trout stream. I have been in Kronau and Zendau trying to recruit men of like mind to oppose Gorkis.”

He felt the weight on his shoulders and the pressure on his neck gradually ease and he turned to see a broad - not a tall figure and recognized the thick woollen sweater which had been the issue of the old grey guards - who, since a half-hearted rebellion in the New Year, had been discharged, dispersed or disposed of. Temyo was staring at the well-weathered face of an intelligent, bold and capable man. He told Temyo to get up and be on his way.

When he returned late that evening and told us of his encounter our first reaction was relief. Then I reproached him.

“But you should have invited him to join us, Temyo. We need men with military

expertise.”

“I sensed he was no joiner, father. We need people who can be team players.....But his shelter was amazing compared to the ramshackle efforts we have built. How many more people can we cram in here when the heavy rain comes? The stink alone is enough to kill.”

We always posted two guards day and night and had devised a defensive system of alarms to protect our camp, ingeniously placing many branches at all accessible points which would snap and crack if trodden on by intruders. We thought it infallible. Two days after Temyo’s return as we sat down to eat our rabbit stew a broad figure appeared in the doorway of our hut and said simply “I am Julo Parknis. I would join you. And I am hungry.”

He took off his great rucksack and unloaded his supplies. In the bottom was a bottle of red wine which he said he had been saving for a special time. He ruffled Temyo’s head and said he was sorry.

Parknis proved to be a great asset. He knew bushcraft and could turn almost anything - roots, berries, plants, such as wild garlic, into nourishing soups. He could revive the deadest fire and catch the most elusive prey. All in all, he was the shrewdest and most resourceful man I ever met. A practical fellow rather than a deep thinker, he hated Gorkis because he was a fraudulent and cruel man. He fell silent whenever we talked politics and of how the Idea could be resurrected and strengthened in another era. He only ever declared himself to be a soldier on the side of right and in this he resembled my younger son Berno who only wanted a return of security, comfort and the carefree life. Our numbers grew late that summer as hardships beyond the forest increased, and it was Parknis who organized the larger camp, had decent latrines dug and supervised the building of shelters stout enough to stand the worst weather; it was he who devised a system of high platforms in the canopy to give us at least an hour’s warning of the approach of patrols; and it was he, the Ghost, who passed on his techniques of silent ambush and combat, targeting stragglers and outsiders in patrolling groups, showing recruits how to break a neck without allowing a squeak to escape from the mouth of the victim.

At first, I was uneasy about killing these young City boys but I told myself it was obvious that they had been chosen for their lack of conscience as so many soldiers down the ages had been, only too willing to indulge their cruel fantasies under the pretext of obedience to a higher authority. I accepted with a degree of reluctance that if we were to make progress and win more guerrillas to our cause, we needed to strike terror into hearts too narrow or callous to feel arguments of compassion. Nanya, my beloved wife whom I missed every dawn and sunset, would have rather submitted to evil in the certain knowledge of salvation, than resort to violence and murder. But this was not an option for atheists and lovers of the Idea. When Temyo, his mother’s son, tried to argue that we should capture Green Guards and convert them to our cause, Parknis almost became angry. “These are Gorkis’s creatures. Specially selected Deltas and never to be trusted. Persuade one to join our cause and he will sneak away in the night to betray us. Believe me!”

Berno strongly agreed and the argument seemed settled. Temyo looked at me and nodded sadly. Sentiment, we all swore, hands joined, should never be allowed to endanger our cause. It was after this that Parknis more or less took over the tactical side of our campaign with Berno his devoted number two, leaving me and Temyo to consider the strategic and political aspects.

Parknis trained us so well that by the autumn we felt confident enough to take the

initiative, not only ambushing patrols which came too close but also intercepting those many kilometres away. Our store of weapons and equipment grew. In the end, our successes meant that it was not the onset of wintry weather alone which kept the green guards out of the forest. But Parknis's greatest coup was the raid on Station Kronau.

We chose a foggy night in mid November. The compound was protected by a high fence topped with savage wire and the only access was through the gate. We waited - twelve of us - in the wood while Parknis in a captured green tunic approached the guards on duty. He was holding my Berno by the scruff of the neck and pressing the barrel of a revolver into his temple. In a clear confident voice he told them he was Parknis of special operations.

"Look what I have found in a tavern in Zendau. An Oppositionist trying to recruit village men. If he's squeezed in the right places, he'll squeal on his friends soon enough!"

We heard the gate swing open and counted to twenty, by which time we knew the guards would be dead. We stepped over them and drifted in as silent as the fog and emptied the armoury of every weapon and every shell. Five minutes after entering, we were following the trail back, collecting our oil-jar candles as we went.

The next day, Julo Parknis said to me. "You realise of course that now they will try to hunt us down before we grow stronger. Soon our tents will be ready."

"Tents?"

Without asking me, he had engaged women in the villages to sew canvas for us.

"With tents we can be a mobile force and melt away from the danger which is coming."

News of our daring raid spread afar and a few new men and women came into the forest looking for us. One man, a City man, convinced us he was not a spy when he told us an alarming story. One morning in early December, his prediction came true. The air was cold and clear and even the most distant sounds carried. One, from the east, at first a buzz became a clatter and a look-out shouted "helicopter!" As a precaution, fires had already been forbidden until the hours of darkness, and this time, although the craft wheeled round and hovered over many parts of the forest, we were safe. But this new development altered our situation. After long debate we decided it would be best to move north and overwinter in an even more remote and dense part of the Old Forest near the hamlet of Denzau, only a few kilometres from the frontier. The river there which formed the border rushed down from the mountain in such a torrent that no defensive patrols had ever been deemed necessary. There were caves and bolt-holes into which we could retreat to find safety. One of our recruits from that area had explored the caves as a boy and knew hideouts which the City soldiers would never find. Such a move meant that we would be peripheral and inactive for months. We would lose the initiative but I was beginning to see a way to broaden the campaign and pose a more serious threat to Gorkis and his clique.

As we moved north by moonlight, beneath showers of stars, my silent son Temyo said to me, and only for me, "Father, the Idea is flawed."

I stopped and looked at him in horror.

"Why do you stare?" he asked. "You know it is, too. It is vulnerable because the little people have no say. They remain children, allowing those who are cleverer and wiser to make decisions. Which makes them too easily duped."

"But it is a freak that an evil man like Gorkis has appeared on the scene!"

“No. Father. Sooner or later it was bound to happen. And he must have many allies. The surpluses were too tempting.”

I asked him despondently if he thought our struggle was futile - as the two brothers from Kronau had said before deserting us to cross the border. He pushed back a fir branch from our faces and sighed.

“No. it is necessary. Mother would have argued, *let the evil run its course* - but we must free the people. But there will have to be a new way. With good men like Yensis in prison and evil men like Gorkis in charge, who will trust the Idea and the System again? There will have to be parties and debate and democracy in a new time - a confusion rather than a cohesion....I have been thinking it over....an engine with bits missing and patched up and with wires sticking out which no-one understands or can properly fix, but which somehow races one moment and chugs the next - like the generator in the village museum - is less vulnerable than a well-oiled machine where one faulty tooth in a cog can cause disaster.”

I almost cried out in despair. “And so you believe we must tolerate again all the evils which bedevil our neighbours? Dereliction? Unemployment? Inequality? Poverty? Waste? And the relentless pressure to consume - a cacophony of fools?”

“No, Father. Wise men will always find places where they can be quiet and spaces to grow their food and their flowers in the sun. The others will be too busy competing to give them a second thought.”

“And this is the best we can expect? How depressing.”

By the moon I saw him look to the east where the star-sprinkled blueness was paling in retreat from the sun about to rise.

“All these December days have been like summer without the heat.” he said. “Where is the fog? God help us if the summer is like winter. The stores are nearly gone.”

His words were prophetic. The early spring was hot and dry and seeds failed to thrive. Rain fell in early June and for a while the crops recovered. But then, week after week, with little respite, chilly winds blew in clouds to blot out the sun. The harvest was meagre and stores fell even further. Farm workers began to drift to the City and the ancient spectre of famine looked out again through new eye sockets. Rumours drifted back to the Outbacks of ringleaders of protest detained and beaten, swelling the ranks in the Vault of those who would be known as the Disappeared. The helicopter swooped in low many times and once even dropped troops a few kilometres away to look for us, but we had covered our tracks well. We were able to survive on our wits and on the fruits of the forest and the river, but more men deserted us saying the struggle was hopeless. Our foreign neighbours beyond the river suffered too but the food which Gorkis had traded for stupidities helped them to get by. Then, Indo, one of those brothers who had gone over, returned with news of a group he had heard of who supported our struggle.

“They promise money and men. Their leader is an Englishman called Armstrong. He is under the surveillance of the authorities.”

“They *promise*” sneered Parknis. “Where is Luzo, your brother? How can I tell you have not returned to spy?”

“No! I hated it there. Look....” he said, opening his rucksack “... I have brought a radio and batteries. Luzo got a job. He works in a hotel as a kitchen porter. He has a woman. He is content. But he will help us if we need him. And Armstong has a large house in Kroniev and is secretly training our refugees to come back as fighters. We are not spies! Our younger sister was raped by a Greenie and killed herself - never forget it! Listen! We can get news direct from the City.”

A despicable tune came from that little plastic thing. I saw in Parknis's face for the first time a look of despair.

We spent that terrible summer and autumn digging bear traps and gathering as many things as we could to dry and store - mushrooms in particular. The local lads knew which ones to leave well alone. We trapped fish, squirrels, rabbits - even crows - and smoked their flesh. We grew carrots and potatoes in the glades. There were crayfish and trout in the streams. The wherewithal for existing was not a problem - only the point. We were down to twenty-three fighters but our skills meant we were as good as a hundred Greenies. I kept morale high by promising to go over the border with Indo *one day soon* to make contact with Armstrong.

The next winter was a very cold one with ice storms but no snow or fog. We went into a kind of hibernation of the mind and body. The spring was late and lame and would lead to the second poor growing summer we had all feared but not discussed. A scout returning from the south reported villages being deserted as chill weather persisted. We desperately needed a fresh success to shake us out of our depression and enhance our fame. The strange drilling operation that dull May provided the ideal opportunity.

*

It all began when a recruit from Denzau secretly visited his sick mother in the dead of night. She told him that her neighbour's youngest son had been out in the forest gathering wild garlic plants and cow parsley to make soup. Walking out of the wood, he had spotted a group of men, some in suits and some in yellow overalls and helmets studying plans near a huge transporter. Dodging from bush to bush, he had moved closer in to listen but the men were speaking a language he could not understand. The helmets and yellow overalls had strange badges which resembled sea shells. As the boy was about to steal away, a noisy dot on the horizon had grown into a silver machine which had landed near the transporter. From it had descended *a tall wobbly man with grey hair*. He had walked unevenly to the group and shaken hands with some and clapped the shoulders of others. The boy heard a click behind him and turned to see a Green Guard. His tender age was his salvation.

"What are they doing?" he had asked.

"Drilling."

"What for?"

"I don't know and neither should you. Get home. Your mother will be needing those soup greens."

As the villagers had from time immemorial, we had been gathering fuel from the nearby tar pits for our lamps in the caves and forest. Even the stones near there would burn. The news brought back by our man was momentous. During June, our scout watched acres of good land being fenced in and a tower being constructed. A large mobile cabin had arrived on the back of another transporter where the drilling team was accommodated. Eventually, I went along to see with my sons.

The cabin stood within fifty metres of the edge of the compound. We counted thirty Green Guards stationed at regular intervals around the high fence. Night fell at ten thirty but the men carried on working under floodlights until midnight when the lights dimmed. It had grown quite misty and Berno, with his sharp eyes, pointed out a red dot moving up and down in the gloom. One of the oil men was smoking. We fell back to the tent we had erected in the woods and at dawn I sent Berno back to tell Parknis

to come and bring one of the green tunics we had captured.

We had to wait three nights. Then, after an afternoon and evening of torrential rain, our old friend, the forest mist, created the perfect cover for our plan. Julo had studied the fence through binoculars and thought that the strange black discs on every other post were wired up to the fence.

“If we cut the fence, the circuit will be broken and an alarm will go off. You bet. And you can bet the lights will all come up. There’s only one way to do it.”

The man from the village had accompanied Julo as a guide and we had sent him back to his farm for a spade.

The cloud of mist we were crouching in was made even denser by the flood light trapped in the vapour. The whine of the drilling was dull but we knew exactly where the cabin lay. We heard the footsteps of guards approaching and fading, and counted an interval of around eleven minutes. In the silent intervals, Julo crept out and loosened the soil with the spade beneath the fence but did not remove it, patting it back down flat every time. At midnight the droning ceased and the lights dipped. Soon we heard laughter and deduced that the guards nearby, assuming the sleeping forest posed little threat, had slackened their vigilance. These were the far Outbacks where nobody came. Parknis waited until there was absolute silence and then stole out to scrape out all the soil he had loosened. “Pray the man is not obese like so many of those English people” was his parting whisper. We peered into the dark for the glowing ember of the cigarette but saw nothing. Had the shellman decided to give up smoking? After ten minutes, we heard the one owl-hoot signal from Parknis which meant he was on his way in. Another ten minutes crept by and there came the sound of patrolling footsteps - then nothing. Five more minutes elapsed and I grew convinced that our ghost had been exorcised, but then the two-hoot call sign sounded, meaning mission accomplished. I went to the fence to meet him. We had three or four minutes before the next patroller arrived. But here was Julo dragging what looked like a pale bag behind him. It was the unconscious shellman, trussed and gagged. He was quite fat but with pushing and pulling we managed to get him under and out. While we dragged our catch into the forest Julo put back the earth, stamped it flat and scattered back the top layer of stones and dry leaves he had removed. Within ten minutes we had struck camp to walk the fifteen kilometres back to the caves. The shellman had come to and was very frightened. I reassured him in English but we kept him gagged and blindfolded until we arrived home.

*

“Are you English?”

“Scottish. McLeod. Graeme. Who are you?”

“Devenskis. They will be wondering how you got out. You will tell them Devenskis captured you.”

“No. I can see in *his* eyes you mean to kill me. You’ll not get another word out of me!”

He meant my Berno. I looked up and tilted my head to one side, meaning *go*. He picked up his rifle and left in disgust. I looked deep into McLeod’s scared eyes and told him that I guaranteed his safety. We were, in spite of appearances, humane people. But he would have to tell me why his company was there.

“It must be the truth. And it must be the whole story.”

He asked if he could smoke and I nodded. I had strong beer fetched for him to loosen his tongue, and he drank it gratefully. What he had to say dismayed me. A few

hundred metres below our beautiful black soil lay huge deposits of oil and gas trapped in the rock and shales at the bottom of an ancient sea. The strata might stretch for many kilometres, under the forest too - and even as far as the City. To free that immense wealth would mean using a process he called *fracking*, involving the use of high explosives. The *rig* they were assembling would be the first of many. The land would be disfigured. I asked him how long his company had been aware of this potential. As the chief engineer he knew that the man he called his CEO had written to our government four years previously to apply for a licence to do test drilling. "The company did the radar tests from the air years ago without anyone knowing. The decision was taken to wait until the price of oil rocketed so high that fracking became worthwhile. It's expensive."

Four years ago. Two years before Neno Yensis had been arrested. The scales fell instantly from my eyes.

"And what response did your company receive from our caring government, Mr McLeod?"

"Positive. But it was not yet the right time to proceed, the letter said. The conditions needed to be right. The political ground needed to be prepared. Then, last November, when we'd given up hope because of all the crackdowns on your rebels and modernisers, out of the blue came the go-ahead. Beginning this April when the weather would allow."

"Mr McLeod, I am not a geologist, but might I be right to be concerned about explosions underground in this part of the world? You know, of course, that this region has a history of serious earthquakes."

He took a long draw on his new cigarette and drank down a gulp of beer.

"I mentioned this to Mr Gorkis when he visited us."

"And he said?"

"He said that the oil and gas were too valuable not to take the risk. He would explain this to the people. But you are right. I am not happy with it. Can I have another drink?"

McLeod never did return to his team. After a few days, he asked me if he could stay, having lost all enthusiasm for the project (and developed a particular liking for our beer). We heard that the green guards had combed the land and the villages in search of him, *an escapee*, never suspecting that he had been abducted. One day in July, on our pathetic little radio we heard Gorkis announce that *a test in the earth in the northern Outlands by foreign friends* had discovered a *miracle* for the nation. His weasely words still gnaw at my ears even today, all these years later.

"Brothers and sisters mine! We need this fuel to sell abroad to replace the food snatched from your babies' mouths by that villain Yensis and his wolves! We need to buy medicines to treat the sick and many more essentials. All the oil will benefit the people. To get to it, our friends need to break the very rocks deep below us. This will be difficult and entail some risk of tremors. Any slight damage to buildings will be made good!"

A month later, when the disappearance of McLeod was history, our resident Ghost slipped under the compound wire and crawled all the way to the rig and transporter and packed them with explosives we had acquired on a previous raid. At the same time as the lot exploded, leaflets we had printed on an old press from Kronau were scattered in all the communities round, and some even in the City.

GORKIS IS A LIAR. THE OIL WILL ONLY TURN INTO GOLD
FOR HIM AND HIS FRIENDS. RISE UP!

But after such a long winter and miserable spring on meagre rations, the people were exhausted and apathetic. Rumours of full silos in the City drew in more desperate people, but news of food riots there stopped them dead in their tracks. Even women and children were said to be among the victims of the new crackdown ordered by Gorkis. The Vault was, of course, filling up with more prisoners. The reign of terror had begun. I seriously doubted that greedy Gorkis had ever wanted it to go that far, but like Macbeth he was in too deep to turn back. The attack on the compound brought soldiers flooding to the north and our position looked increasingly in doubt. We were a mere twenty-seven people and we needed a fall-back position. Our man from Denzau came to me and said there was a route through the potholes and caverns which he was sure would lead to the forest over the border. As a child he had gone so far in and turned back afraid. It had been summer - a very dry one - and he and his friends had seen an opening below the waterline to a cave beyond. If we went in winter before the ice melt then we would surely only get our feet wet. The entrance was narrow but we were thin enough to scrape through. At that point he looked at McLeod who was snoozing and made a meaningful smile. It said I would have to reduce his rations, liquid and solid.

“I’m sure we could block the entrance with boulders. We would be safe on the other side.”

We would all become ghosts. The capture of a guard in September in a bear trap told us they were getting perilously close. We struck camp and made everything look as if we had never been there, burying deep all the ashes and bones, and filling in latrines. We retreated into the deepest cavern and sealed ourselves in to wait until either the waters or the hunt for us subsided with the onset of November. That spring, I would have to make good my rash promise.

In Denzau

Like Oksima, Davo’s sister Davida was blessed with second sight - or maybe call it a woman’s instinct to be ultra cautious. Without especially looking, she had been aware of the stocks in the village depleting and without staring, in case she was thought to be disapproving, she had witnessed the illegal imports grow and the greedy eyes of men and women widen over the appearance of liquor, tobacco and *fripperies* as she described them in private to her husband. She was a religious, even an ascetic woman who believed that the body was a temple not to be defiled. Her cautiousness and reading of the weather runes had led her to plant extra in the garden and stock up in her deep cellar while others trusted to continued good fortune. She had preserved and pickled while others *had got themselves pickled. And soon they would be in a pretty pickle - you mark my words.* Her husband had not disagreed with her. He hardly ever did.

When Davo turned up in the middle of the night half frozen with an exhausted Oksima, Davida took an instant dislike to her. She was, as we know, the epitome of slender and lovely young womanhood; Davida was short, stocky and snub-nosed with a round boneless face. Davo lost no time in telling her, as she made soup that first night, that his companion was a wanted woman who had been involved with smuggling - but he begged her, knowing how judgemental Davida could be, to accept in mitigation that she had been conscripted by a drunken, domineering father.

“Is she your mistress, Davo?” she asked as Oksima slept by the open fire.

“No! A friend. Her...husband was murdered in the forest a week ago. Shot trapping rabbits.”

“Then she can have the little room at the back.”

Her husband Paolo looked up in silent approval before returning to his paper. Davo had met him only once, at the wedding, and he was not inclined to improve his opinion of him. The headline rejoiced in the capture of more of Yensis’s Gang in the Outbacks. Davo asked if he could look and he read of a secret drinking den being raided and destroyed by the valiant Green Guards. A photograph showed a bottle of brandy being poured away by a smiling soldier.

“Thank Goodness!” declared Davo. “Cynical tongues would be saying that they kept the drink for themselves.”

Paolo took back his paper with a puzzled look at his brother-in-law. He had no wish to state his opinion - if he had one. Dictators loved such men.

The week’s grace which Davida had granted her brother became two, then three and finally indefinite, for Oksima made herself so useful in the kitchen and cellar that Davida warmed to her. One night when Davo was reading by candle, Oksima crept in and told him she was very sad and lonely. Davo almost fainted to see her pull her nightdress over her head and shake her hair straight. The body he had tried not to think of, for danger of driving himself mad, was before him in all its slender glory. She cuddled down warm at his side and Davo gasped. In a whisper she confessed she had fallen in love with him.

“Haven’t you noticed?”

“It never occurred to me you ever could. I’m not handsome.”

“Up close you are. And in that head you are. You care. Give me your hand.”

To touch her breasts made him groan. She told him to hush in case Mrs Grumpy heard him. They giggled.

The next day they told his sister they were going to be married and in late January a small ceremony attended only by family and Davida’s neighbours took place in the cold village hall. Davida apologized for the absence of joy. There had been many arrests with neighbour denouncing neighbour for the possession of contraband or for critical words said too loud, settling scores which had been half forgotten in the New Time. In April there were fewer people to work the dry land and neglect began to reveal its sour face. The old enthusiasm had gone and jobs were done with mechanical reluctance, if at all. Davida was sure that this apathy transmitted itself in some strange way to the seedlings, already distressed in the inhospitable fields. The good soft bread the people were so used to grew rare and was rumoured to be reserved for the side plates of the higher echelons in the City. Other rumours said that Alphas had acquired foreign money to buy delicate food in private shops. The rural people had their root vegetables, their poultry and wild pigeons but the good white bread was replaced by grey bread and resentment. Davo and Oksima kept putting off their plan to join the resisters in the forest. After he and his sister had quarrelled in early summer over an old family matter, Davo decided it was time to leave. He grew a beard and Oksima darkened her hair with herbs. She was already pregnant after their passion and it was important to move on before her belly grew too large. They looked in vain in the forest for Devenskis and in July they were taken in by a commune which had suffered from arrests and a fatal outbreak of cholera. They had decided to call a boy child Ano. But he was born too early and without expert medical intervention could not survive. Years later, when the clearances began in order to make way for the oil rigs, Oksima saw his death as a blessing.

Company

I had a succession of cellmates, in general especially selected, it seemed, to plague me in some way. I suspected some were spies sent to test me. To most I said little and shut myself away in the worlds I had invented. I began even to miss the deadness of my previous solitary existence. There were only a few who turned out to be worthy of note.

The first I will mention because of his intelligence and goodness. He had gone to work in an institution which helped disaffected children to become good and useful members of our community*. When I asked him, at first, point blank why he had been arrested he was evasive and I, not unreasonably, marked him down as a spy.

Gradually, however, something in his eyes, the calm of his voice and his hours of staring implacably at the white wall - as if it was a screen onto which he was projecting his inner pictures - persuaded me he was genuine. He began to tell me of how the increasing incidence of alcoholism had brought him a swelling number of referrals - children who had witnessed drunken domestic violence. There was one story he told which will illustrate to those of you who doubt the inner virtue of the Idea just how misguided you are - and if this section is censored by those who have commissioned me to write this history, then so be it. Julia agrees.

My new cellmate looked at me one day, breaking off from his reverie and said without any prompting that he did not believe I had been guilty of any crime. Of course, I saw this as a ploy. For all I knew he was carrying one of those recording devices.

“I shall understand” he said “If you are not inclined to speak about your case, but we have - or rather had - a friend in common who spoke of you highly. Her name was Rosima.”

“You knew Rosima Solcis? In that case, what was her favourite flower?”

He smiled at my suspicion and brusqueness and replied sadly that, when he had first known her as her teacher in her teens - she a promising ecologist - it was the bluebell. I felt myself blush and explained that my trust in people had been all but destroyed.

“That is probably the worse punishment they could inflict” he said. “I keep mine alive by thinking of all the lives I have saved. There is an ear in all people which can listen to reason and goodness. I understand if you are reluctant to speak of your achievements. May I speak of some of mine?”

I nodded. He told me many heartening stories, but his success with a boy he called Deno was the one which comforted him - and inspired me - the most. Deno had been a fourteen-year-old City boy completely beyond control and counselling. He hated his parents, his siblings and his teachers. He was pale, shabby and ugly, a boy who had already started drinking, following in the alcoholic footsteps of his father. After a very short time it became clear to my cellmate - his name was Andio Marenkis - that above authority and above his environment, what the boy detested the most was himself. He could not see the point of being alive and had no hope. Marenkis had racked his brains to try to reach that *inner ear* he had spoken of. He had been reading Volume Two of The Idea when a possible solution occurred to him. He told me of his very own parable of the seed.

One morning, in advance of the boy coming for his hour-long session, and in anticipation of yet another fruitless long silence, he had placed a white packet on the

*It is important to note that because not all parents were perfect we were not a perfect society!

table with **Deno** written on it. The boy had sat down and slouched in his chair, avoiding as usual all eye contact with Marenkis who had scarcely looked up from the report he was reading. As the clock ticked towards the hour, it was the boy who spoke first to ask what was in the packet, and he was invited to open it. Out fell three tiny seeds. The boy asked what he was expected to do with them and, in reply, Marenkis placed an earthenware pot on the table. At this, the boy had shrugged.

“What about soil?” he eventually asked, and his tutor placed a small bag of compost next to the pot. The boy filled the pot and pushed the seeds in.

“Do you need anything else, Deno?”

“Water.”

“Go to the sink. Be careful not to put in too much.”

Into those dead eyes a glimmer of interest had entered. As the weeks passed, as the sole seed which had germinated grew more leaves and branchlets, the boy took more and more interest in it. Marenkis told him to touch the leaves and smell his fingers - and watched as the boy’s eyes reacted - negatively - to the acrid stink. He told him to suspend judgement until the plant had fully developed. Whenever the boy enquired what it would be, Marenkis smiled and told him to wait and see. Deno came one day and saw that a sprig of eight tiny yellow flowers had emerged from a joint between a leaf and a stem. Each flower had a tiny yellow cone at its centre.

“Is that it?” had exclaimed the boy in disgust and disappointment. “What a waste of time!”

“No. Deno. You cannot judge yet. As I never judged you when you first came to me. Be patient!”

This was to be the only direct parallel his teacher would draw with the boy’s situation, leaving it to his intelligence to draw his own conclusions. He gave Deno a tiny brush which any child might use with a paint box and smiled at him. As if by instinct, he realised what had to be done, and gently rubbed the flowers with the tip.

The seedling soon became a bush with many flower sprigs and the following week Deno was astonished to see that on the very first sprig of all, three tiny green globes had appeared. Not all the flowers had fruited, his teacher pointed out, some had even withered. When Deno asked him *why - when he had brushed them so carefully?* - he was told that there was no explanation - that they were like promises not kept, hopes which were disappointed.

The day arrived when one of the fruits which had swollen turned orange and the boy realised what it was, and he asked excitedly if he could eat it. His teacher told him it would be a pity to eat it too early, before it was properly ripe, when the flavour would have become intensely sweet. The next day the boy came by uninvited and was allowed to eat it, and his bright face, changed beyond recognition, showed the benefit of all the lessons which the seed had taught him. He went back to normal school and qualified as a horticulturist with distinction, becoming at twenty-three the director of a huge tomato farm at Jenau. Marenkis’s methods became a core part of youth remediation and he was awarded the Gold Medal for services to the Idea.

Then one day he was taken from my cell for his trial and did not return. When I enquired of the warder what had happened to him he drew his finger across his throat and smirked.

“He was a child-molester. Denounced by a former ward. Found guilty. Dirty bastard.”

“No. He was a good man!” I shouted. “Why can none of you see what is happening? Is this how you want to spend your life - down here, helping to torment and torture innocent men and women?”

“Look. I ask no questions and have no opinions. There is a waiting list to be a jailer. The food is good. I do my job. So, you just do your time and be quiet.”

Who else should I mention? One morning - it had to be morning because I had been given a breakfast of thin porridge - a man was brought in and thrown into the corner, his head just missing the toilet hole. I helped him to his feet and he thanked me. He was about forty, had a high forehead with prominent brow ridges, so I held him to be an Alpha. And yet his ragged military uniform said he could not be. This discrepancy put me immediately on my guard, particularly when he was so grateful to me for my kindness. He told me he had been Commander of the Kronau base, deposed and tortured on the flimsy grounds that he read foreign literature and was suspected of turning a blind eye to contraband in his barracks. This he had utterly denied. His name was Benkis. Within days, when he had begun to recover from his wounds, he began to fulminate against the “cowards” who had “run the show.”

“Why were we content to stay within our borders, enduring the cold hostility and propaganda of our nearest neighbours? A surprise assault would have made them think twice! And it would have put an end to illegal trade. We had the lasers. They wouldn’t have dared retaliate. All very suspicious – such a lack of guts! Who stood to gain from such pussyfooting? Who?”

His belligerence put me further on my guard. I would rather have been tortured on some contraption than endure the presence of these people in my cell and the anxiety they caused me. Of course, my captors knew this. To agree with Benkis would have been proof that my internationalist inclinations were bogus. To disagree, in a climate of paranoia, could be construed as treason.

Such bellicosity, from a man who was at least a high Beta, was intensely depressing to me. It reminded me of those vicious boys who had blacked my eye at school. He exhibited the same brainless love of aggression for its own sake. A “surprise attack” and its inevitable casualties would have inspired not fear and respect, but hatred and revenge. One day, forgetting my resolve to remain silent whenever he took this tack, I rounded on him.

“You are - were – a soldier, sworn only to defend the Idea – not attack its detractors. Such thoughts are unconstitutional.”

He laughed and spat the word “unconstitutional” to the ceiling. I felt my anger rise. Were not soldiers who bore arms in order to defend territory only a boot-stride away from those conscripted to *conquer* territory?

“Do soldiers ever pause to consider why they bear arms to overrun lands belonging to others? Did it never occur to Alexander or Napoleon - or Hitler - that the peaceful life of the peasant displaced and usurped, the people living in quiet harmony with nature, was far preferable to the turmoil of their own? Did they never say to themselves that within thirty or forty years a man must live and die?”

Benkis leant back against the wall, shaking his head. I took this as an admission of defeat.

“Is not the love of a family and of friends, and the quiet contemplation of the sky, the woods, the fields, the savour of their riches more valuable than any captured bauble or castle, gained by bloodshed?”

“Oh you high and mighty Alpha!” he retorted. “If the Idea is of value, it must have its sacrifices and victims. You idealise the life of the peasant to reach such a conclusion. It was brutal, short and unstable. Only by surpluses could its anxieties be eased. You are a Master Historian. You know this.”

“Yes! But what caused the greatest part of those anxieties? The constant threat of

rampage, confiscation, taxation and billeting - against which the vagaries of the seasons were minor. The tyranny of his so-called betters! The aristocracy was ever a criminal class in spite of its airs and graces. And people like you its unwitting executioners.”

He accused me of naivety. I would have none of that!

“Why is your mind so dominated by the use of force? Why do you see earth as a battlefield?”

He spread out his arms and waved at the walls. He said I had missed the point.

“We should have been bolder and gone out to conquer the world for the Idea – just as Napoleon wished to topple the corrupt dynasties opposed to the Revolution. The people would have welcomed us as liberators. Some chance of doing it now – in here!”

His eyes filled with tears and I knew then he was not a stoolie.

When I woke the next morning he was gone.

*

“You and your infernal Idea! Could you - can you - not see how futile it is to try and recreate paradise? Men are fallen. Their world is destined to be ever imperfect. Can you not see that attempts to impose virtue lead to this? Men in cells? And you are an historian! At least in a filthy democracy people are permitted to believe whatever rubbish they wish. Nobody cares. And people like me would have been left in peace!”

I was quite unprepared for this assault from this mild-looking man who had told me he had been arrested for his Christian beliefs. At first I did not reply, thinking I was being deliberately provoked into making some indiscrete remark, but as he continued to mutter on about the godlessness and futility of the Idea, I saw no harm - after all was I not in a cell *because* of my apostasy and hypocrisy? - I saw no harm at all in defending it. I told him he was talking nonsense.

“Your kind do not care about the planet because you think you are going to a better place - when you are dead - and *rotting*! Show me a better place than the plains and the forest! I know the Idea is right.”

“Well if it is - explain why we are sitting here inhaling each other’s sweat and shit.”

The argument was furious - two caged men letting off steam - and raged on for hours. He spoke about personal salvation - how his Jesus had - literally - risen above the cacophony and stench of persecution. I spoke of the rational spirit in Man which would have to triumph ultimately or He would perish in that very quagmire he spoke of.

“The only progress we can make is not in the blind alleys of technology - but in rediscovering the harmony we have lost with the world!”

Upon this he seized with glee and relish. “Precisely! *Rediscover the harmony we have lost with the world....*Eden! You - and your Mentor - are children wishing to return to the Mother. You believe that those drunken, dissolute wretches up there can be forced back into Eden. Well, they won’t and don’t put up with it. They spurn the crab apples you offer them. They want much, much juicier fruit,” he exclaimed, lasciviously licking his lips.

I did not understand his misanthropy. Did he really believe, I asked, that there was no hope for the world, for mankind? Why were such disgusting creatures worth the attention of a god? Why did he wish to sit cheek by jowl in heaven with them? He made the sign of the cross and pointed upwards.

“There! There is the hope...I can live in a dungeon, in the desert, in a cave...all temporary...meaningless, compared to the eternity of joy to come. Your Idea - strip away the galleries, the choral societies, the orchestras, the *diversions* - reduces Man to a gut. Wine and bread in the one end - *what* out of the other?”

“You are mad!”

“You know I am right. Your Idea is futile. It reduces men to aphids. And you restrict their diet. You deny them Free Will and treat them as children.”

“As God did! Your god did not understand the creature he created.”

Angrily, he spouted more and more biblical verse at me, and when he declared that men should not live by bread alone, I interrupted him.

“But that was precisely the kind of creature your god fashioned, according to the first chapter of your book. A dim ape - not self-aware - a forest browser!”

“No, you fail to grasp the symbolic meaning of bread. The first man disobeyed God and discovered Sin. And his descendants can now only be saved by Jesus - not your precious schools and committees.”

“Religion was tolerated, but most people chose to be atheists.”

“Materialists! But you denied them the best material!”

The warder came in and ordered us to be quiet. Both of us believed we had shaken one another’s faith. But that night I dreamt of that stupid, drunken thug Venio Salkis clutching his brandy bottle in the forest. I awoke without hope. My cellmate awoke and prayed - eyes brimming with hope - even though, to my mind, illusory. But did we not both suffer from illusions? The Idea was good, but not men. What was the point of an idea which was unrealisable?

A few days later, the man was taken out and as he left, he turned to plead with me. “Pray for salvation before it is too late, Neno Yensis.”

Later, I was ashamed to recall what I retorted. “I would rather spend eternity in this hellhole than a day with you in heaven!”

It rang in my ears every morning. The man never did return. The warder only said he had been arrested for preaching religion on a street corner. I did not bother to ask what would happen to him.

Some cellmates stayed days, others weeks, until one morning they would be taken away for a shower or a medical or exercise. Permanently away. Often I heard their screams. After their departure it seemed as if I had dreamt them into being, that strange sensation we have about certain events in our lives. Had Venegis really come into my cell one distant day, and had I really read a letter from Andia? The clarification I had so badly wanted from Venegis gradually became a shapeless monster, a shadow in my thoughts, threatening to overpower my sanity. He certainly had a torturer’s knack. There was little relief - certainly in the pleasures of the flesh! The food became worse and less. When I complained to the warder about a particularly thin and malodorous soup he swore at me and said that that was better than many outside were eating - because of *bastard corn thieves* and others like me. I seized on his indiscretion - that juicy tidbit of news. I managed to get him to tell me about the series of poor harvests.

The meagre food gave me so little sustenance that I lost the wherewithal to keep my body fit. My strength ebbed. One morning, the first of one July of many, I found myself ridiculously looking forward even to the visit of the silent, increasingly broken-down doctor, who had started to smell of stale brandy, and I was amazed when not he but another man, a much younger man, turned up in the special examination room.

He seemed so humane and friendly that I was almost overcome with joy, until I told myself that this was, no doubt, just for show, just another subtle torment which had been devised on Venegis's orders. But when I was suddenly supplied with better food one evening, I realised that it must be the doctor's doing, for my malnourishment was obvious. In August I thanked him and he gave me a knowing smile. I decided to trust him. Over the next few months, he told me in whispers between his medical questions and instructions how bad things were, and one morning he slipped me a letter. In my cell, I waited till my latest companion had gone out for a shower and there was silence in the corridor. I was amazed to read the following in English.

Dearest Neno,

I pray that this letter will somehow reach you. I can scarcely imagine what misery you, a man of integrity must be experiencing in your cell. My sister, your poor mother, alas, could not endure the thought. Hela is with me in London but the streets here are mean and paved with cynicism. I am hoping my cousin in Vancouver will return a favour she owes me and give her and Berno employment in her hotel. Your nieces Gala and Ermina are truly charming.

Never despair! News reports on the BBC tell of good men and women in the forests preparing to challenge this tyrant Gorkis and his regime. Soldiers are said to be deserting to swell their ranks. The corruption of the Idea is world news. Many here and in other countries are longing for change - a chance to experience a better life, the saner life which evil, greedy men in your country are destroying. There is talk of a new International Brigade being formed, in spite of the despicable opposition of our governments who benefit from trade with Gorkis.

One day we will surely meet for the first time,

Keep your faith,

Your Uncle Neville

There was a photo of Hela's family waving to me cheerfully. The letter was eight years, two months and three days old. Its age tarnished its optimism and yet I treasured it and found a hiding place for it in a pillow. The doctor, Goreskis, told me it had arrived in my old flat and had fallen into the hands of a *friend* in the police who had seen through the lies of Gorkis. When his silent colleague, my carer, had been found dead, reeking of bootleg liquor, Goreskis had applied to replace him. His strenuous condemnation of the rebels had carried him through the interview. He would be my sacred link with the outside.

The years were passing without a change of season. The same ceiling light - my personal dawn - came on at exactly the same time each day. How I yearned for a high window with a shaft of sun, and the sound of a bird. You might wonder how I remained sane. - and today I am amazed that I did. On Mondays I kept my eyes closed and walked through my past from the beginning. On Tuesdays I thought about my sister Hela in Canada and her new life. I imagined what my nieces were like and what they might be doing and saying. On Wednesdays I tried to turn the pages of the Mentor's work, and thought about amendments which could be made to the System in

the light of events. On Thursdays I imagined conversations with friends and foes from previous eras. On Fridays I went back to the novel I was writing and re-read it from the beginning before adding a new chapter. On Saturdays I painted pictures in my mind and on Sundays listened to music there. I had a routine - *my* routine - and I kept my sanity because the routine was the only thing I had not lost.

Although Uncle Neville Armstrong's promises and assurances seemed ever more implausible, I knew that Gorkis could not live for ever, and I felt that if the people were suffering as much as I had been told, then things must change. Then, glory be, the doctor told me during one visit that slogans protesting my innocence had begun to appear on walls and my heart surged with new hope. I thought of the brave Scholls painting white crosses over black swastikas in the night streets of 1942 Munich.

"They keep whitewashing the letters" whispered the doctor as I took the deep breaths he loudly commanded "But they keep coming back - like the truth!"

"But so does evil, my friend. So does evil."

A month later the doctor brought another surprise, no a shock. There was, he said, a rumour all over the City that there existed a letter which proved that Rosima Solcis was a victim, not of me, but of powerful men at the heart of government.

"It has even spread abroad, and foreign newspapers and programmes are accusing Mero Gorkis of leading a corrupt and evil regime. Friends have picked up transmissions. One day soon you will be free, my friend!"

For a while I was in a state of euphoria, but one morning I could tell that something momentous had happened. Breakfast was late and the warder would not speak to me, not even to be sarcastic, and there were terrible shouts and screams from distant cells. An hour later I was stunned to be told by an official in a black uniform that I would be tried on charges of treason and murder. He refused to explain why, saying only that he would not deign to respond to my disingenuous remarks and questions. My companion, a black-marketeer of some kind, returned from the shower block with an amazing story. Mero Gorkis had been blown up in his aircraft.

"A man called Venegis is to replace him - with emergency powers. The rebels are responsible. *Your* friends. You're in for it now, Mr Evangelist...."

Rebellion

"I'm sorry to have to be the one to have to tell you all," said the Pezo Lenkis, the commune leader, with tears rolling down his cheeks "But the land we farm has been commandeered for drilling purposes."

Davo and Oksima had long feared this. Over the brow of the nearby hill, a new tower had recently appeared. The towers were like a metal army, plodding up the valley in file and getting closer. Now the couple and their friends were to be moved into a camp near the City until they could be allocated to new farms and smallholdings. This was the catalyst which the pair needed to shake them out of their state of indecision. The arrival of five green guards that same evening made it all the more vital to take action. Carefully wrapping his precious letter in an oilcloth, Davo placed it next to his skin and pulled on his coat. Oksima loaded their food reserves into a rucksack. They waited until the two guards below their window had gone around the corner to smoke, and then threw down two sheets knotted together, and tied them to the window post.

The swaying forest, under cascades of stars and a bright moon, seemed to be inviting them to come, and without a sound or a backward look at the dark building where they had survived for four years, they were soon embraced by the thick fir trees. It

was August, the windy night was warm and they walked on until first light, by which time they could not take another step. The bracken was dry near the stream whose whispers had beckoned them, and they were soon inside their tiny tent, sewn together months and months ago for the journey and quest they knew they were sooner or later destined to make. Of course, they were unaware that it was almost certainly the same stream by which Devenskis and his sons had first camped.

They were woken by shadows breathing and bearing down on their tent. They heard the pegs loosened and saw the canvas lifted. The sudden light blinded them but they could make out that seven or eight figures were surrounding them. Adjusting to the sun, Davo was afraid to see how greedily sets of soldiers' eyes were peering down and feasting on Oksima.

"You Oppos?" asked one guard, who seemed to be their leader.

"Oppos?" asked Oksima, sitting up and buttoning the front of her blouse. "Do you mean rebels? No! We're out collecting - anything we can find to eat. Look."

She opened the neck of their backpack but they were not interested. As she was lifted up and stripped, she begged Davo not to do anything - she would endure it and it would be over. As the men enthusiastically took their turns, she steadfastly looked up from the bracken where they had laid her and kept mouthing *I love you* to Davo who was weeping. A rifle crack brought the proceedings to a halt. Her latest lover scrambled to his feet and hitched up his trousers just in time to be booted in the groin by a soldier in dark green, an older man with grey side whiskers and intense eyes which displayed their disgust with what he had wandered into.

"What kind of men are you?" he shouted. "What did you learn from your mothers? To treat a woman this way??"

The man who had first spoken had the temerity to reply. "She is a peasant, Commander Lovenskis. The men are desperate."

"You are a pig!" he retorted, sending the man spinning with a blow from the butt of his rifle. "A City pig. You wonder why your kind are hated in the country?"

The two men who had held Davo's head and neck to force him to watch now let go.

"Is she your sister?" asked Lovenskis, failing to recognize Davo from the Kronau barracks - for it was Lovenskis who had escorted him across the parade ground to be interrogated days before his escape. Davo suddenly remembered him and almost panicked.

"No. My wife. My dear wife."

Lovenskis aimed his rifle at the genitals of one of Davo's captors and fired. He screamed and stared at the ragged red hole between his legs.

"There you bastard - try to rape another *peasant!*"

He helped Oksima to her feet. She looked around at her attackers in slow scorn and defiance. Lovenskis picked up Oksima's skirt from the bracken and threw it to her. He told her to soak herself in the stream - *before the foul seed of one his men took hold*. He was, he said, ashamed to be in charge of such worthless dolts, with no scruple or conscience. He glowered at each man in turn.

"Leave these people your supplies and turn about! And pick *him* up! The man with no balls!"

A moment later, the bank of the stream was clear and the tramp of disappearing feet had been replaced by a solitary bird daring to sing again - as if no-one had been there and nothing had happened. Oksima sat in the rivulets, back straight and legs apart, contemplating the blessing waters carrying the event away. Davo crouched down beside her. She stroked his arm.

"Davo" she said at last "I would kill every last one of them."

“Does it...hurt much?”

“No! They were pathetic. After Ano and you - barely men.”

She stood up and grabbed handfuls of bracken to dry herself. Davo loaded the bread meat and cheese from the troop into their backpack. He took a deep breath and screamed “I will KILL you all” into the silent woods.

“Save your anger” she said. “We should follow the stream towards the mountain. It was a dream. It never happened.”

When Davo woke the next morning, the sun was high and the air in the tent was warm and stifling. His arm was in a tight grip and he thought he was dreaming, but it was Oksima grabbing him in silent terror. A broad shadow of a head and shoulders and then a rifle were projected onto the canvas. Davo grabbed the hilt of his knife.

“We mean no harm,” said Oksima with admirable self-control. “We have come into the forest looking for mushrooms. We are hungry.”

For a while there was no reply; then, gruffly and dangerously

“August is too early. For mushrooms.”

“But there are blackberries and nuts as well” said Davo. “We would gather anything.”

Hardly breathing now, they watched the rifle barrel lower and vanish. The head came closer and said “Davo? Is that you? Davo Pusi? Of Kronau?”

“Pus-Kis!” he replied, putting a name now to that brusque voice he had half-recognized. “Julo? Julo Parknis?”

“The same!”

Davo struggled out and embraced him, but he stood there unmoved and did not return the gesture; only nodded and said how thin his friend was. Their hunger was obvious, so with bracken and twigs he built a fire and took metal rods from his backpack to make a spit. Next out was a floppy waterfowl and they watched as he plucked and drew it before threading it onto the top rod. Oksima turned the bird while the two men brought each other up to date on their experiences of the last few years. Her mouth began to water as the skin sizzled and she dropped down onto her haunches to catch the juices in a bowl she had been given. These she kept dripping back onto the breast to keep it moist. She borrowed Julo’s knife to test it, and found it was cooked.

“But why have you come into the forest, Davo?” asked Julo as he divided up the bird on a wooden platter, while Davo poured beer. “It is not safe. Not for a woman..... Well done - it is roasted through.”

“We have come to find Devenskis” said Oksima simply. Julo said nothing to this, only apologized for the slender pickings on the young mallard. *Even the ducks were getting thinner*, he said, looking Oksima up and down as if seeing her properly for the first time. She reddened and indignantly asked him what he was staring at. He tossed away a leg bone and looked at Davo.

“Is she your wife? If not, you’d better get a ring on her finger quick. She is far too pretty. My men are only used to ugly women.”

Davo suppressed his indignation at such a remark, but Oksima put down the food and stood up over him. “*She? Her?* You talk about me as if I am some dumb filly! I am - was - Oksima Salkis, outlaw and smuggler! As good as you or any man!”

Julo, rarely for him, smiled and apologized for his rough manners.

“I am a soldier - not a gallant like Davo here. That was the closest I come to paying compliments. Now, why have you decided to come into the forest *today?*”

He listened as they told him of their meeting with the commune elder and the news of the oil rigs. And he nodded sadly, admitting that there was little that could be done.

“Little can be done? You mean nothing! So why are you and your comrades in the

forest then?"

"To survive, Oksima, why else??"

He confessed now that he had quarrelled badly with Devenskis and his elder son Temyo.

"I am with Berno Devenskis - his younger boy - and a few others. We harass and hover. We are wasps."

"Then it is hopeless?" asked Davo.

"While the Greenies are well fed, yes. Those *pigs*. Gorkis is building gas and oil pipelines now. We would attack them more but they are well patrolled and protected by wire and alarms. The people in the towns and villages are too weak and afraid to rebel, even though the tremors shake their walls and rattle their roofs. A child was killed by a falling tile last week - so we heard."

"It is true" said she. "It happened in the commune in the valley.....Davo, I wish we had gone to the camp with the rest. At least we would have been fed. At least -"

"No. People are starving in the camps. You did the wise thing."

He told them how Gorkis had bought in crack mercenaries to guard the rigs and the Strip - the nickname for the narrow snake of land which would eventually carry the pipelines over the border.

"It was over this we quarrelled and split."

Devenskis, he explained, had been for waiting until security had grown laxer and weaker as the pipeline grew longer; Parknis had been for executing lightning raids.

"We tried one a while back - and lost three good men."

"So Devenskis was right" said Oksima, pleased to taunt Julo, to whom she had taken a violent dislike.

"Devenskis is becoming an old fool - a windbag. He promised to contact Armstrong over the border in Kroniev but dares not climb the mountain. The potholes are flooded - too dangerous. But what is the point anyway? I hear Armstrong is a middle-aged man like Devenskis - a pudgy Englishman. We need fighters! Gorkis has helicopters and the latest weapons."

He looked at the sky and said they had better be moving - they could detect heat - even body heat from the air. He told them to pack up while he scrubbed out the fire and cleared up their mess. The pair were folding the tent when Parknis held up his hand for silence. They looked at him, amazed. What had he heard? He indicated with his palms that they should stay put and pick the nearby berries, and took himself off back the way he had come, disappearing quickly from view. Davo listened and shrugged, but Oksima had better ears. Somebody was coming, she said and began to pick the berries. Out of the gloom and into the sunlit clearing, a green uniform emerged, staggering. The soldier's face was smeared with dirt and his hair was unkempt. Oksima saw at once that he was not one of those who had raped her. He spied the pile of duckling bones and fell on them, sucking off what juice and scraps of flesh remained. At last, he looked at the pair and asked if they were Oppositionists. Davo could hear that he was a City boy and therefore shook his head vehemently. "No" said Oksima as rustically and naively as she could. "We are gatherers - from the village."

The clever-dick in the soldier could not help himself. "Gatherers! So, which tree did you pluck the duck from?"

Davo affected to overlook the sarcasm and pointed at the stream.

"We found it. Dead in the water. Floating..."

The soldier smiled at the lie. He wanted, he said, to join the Opposition. Had they seen any sign of the rebels? They pretended not to have heard, leaving it up to the

hidden Parknis to decide how to handle the situation. As the man stood up, sucking his fingers clean, something glittered in the sun and there was a whistling sound - and both were amazed to see the point of a knife emerge from his windpipe. He fingered it in wonder, almost grinning in shock, before falling dead at their feet. Julo strolled out of the gloom, drew out the knife and wiped it on the bracken. Oksima stared at the twitching body in awe, as if seeing her Ano in his lonely throes of death.

"You murdered him. A man who wanted to join us..." she said hatefully, looking at Davo, who was too shocked to speak. He had, himself, just relived the death of his outspoken comrade Flenis on the parade ground in Kronau.

"You murdered him! He was"

"He was a plant, an agent..."

"How do you know? Can you trust nobody?"

She asked the treetops what sort of a people they had become. Julo told her to stop the playacting and moralising. He told them to look closer at the fallen man - *were their faces as dirty as his?* In spite of her hatred, Oksima looked at Davo's clean face and he looked at hers.

"They always use that stale old trick!" said Julo to himself, turning the corpse onto its back. "*The exhausted fellow lost in the forest.....they never learn.*"

"That's crazy!" she retorted. "What if he got dirty falling over?"

In response, Julo tore open the jacket and shirt and told her to come round and look. Taped to the dead man's right breast, above the nipple, was a device. Now Julo looked skyward and pointed.

"They have satellites. He would have led those bastards straight to our camp, the viper."

Oksima blushed deeply in apology. Julo told them, that if they were squeamish, they had better follow the stream down and wait for him in the next clearing. She asked him what he was going to do, and in answer he threw his blade from one hand to the other. He was going leave the soldier's friends his usual warning - it was bad for their morale. As soon as they had taken their things and were out of sight, he drew the corpse like the mallard, removed the head and placed it carefully in the belly. He cut down a sapling, leaving a short stump, sharpened it and thrust the soldier down onto it after first removing his uniform, which he stuffed it in his backpack. He removed the boots and tied them together round his own neck, before patting the bare shoulder and telling the open neck quietly as he left, that he was sorry, but he had not started it.

*

"Two more mouths to feed!, Julo?" exclaimed Berno. "How do you know they're not spies?"

"No. Davo was a comrade at Kronau. And she is a fugitive - an ex-smuggler of brandy."

Davo looked around at the motley crew and counted seventeen, fourteen men and three manly women. He gripped Oksima's hand tight as he recalled what Julo had said about them. He could read the thoughts of many of the men as their eyes stared at her. The couple were very tired. They had followed the stream with Julo for many kilometres, watching it combine with others to grow into a river which flowed slowly down towards the abrupt torrent whose roar could be heard now beyond the forest, rushing away from the watchful mountain - a mountain risen out of nothing, flanks stepped with pines and firs, to lose its peak in the cloud.

The camp was hidden beneath trees in a dark green light, as sombre as the mood of

these rebels who sat around sharpening, whittling, gutting fish or plain staring. Some were bandaged, some lying on makeshift bracken beds. Oksima saw again the disgust in Berno's face and could control her tongue no longer.

"Davo, we are not welcome here. We made a mistake. These people have no future. We should go to the mountain and leave this hopeless country. This place smells of self-pity."

Davo had tried to hush her but Julo admired her spirit and encouraged her. When one of the men challenged her to say what sacrifices *she* had made, she had to be restrained. She declared that only yesterday she had been gang-raped, that she had lost a good man to *those murdering traitors*, and a child because the coward of a village doctor had gone abroad.

"But I never lost my self-respect and never will!"

Later, as the sun was losing its bearings among the trees, a cautious fire was lit and trout were skewered for spit-roasting. Beer, made from wild hops and wild honey, was handed round, and soon the spectre of despair was being driven back into the dark forest - at least for a while. The fish was delicious and they ate it with watercress which grew in the still reaches of the river - and with boiled nuts mashed together and roasted. The beer was soon getting the better of Berno's tongue and he began to speak of their plan to establish a safe house in the City in the late autumn when the longer hours of darkness would be their allies. *The City was as a bonfire awaiting a spark!* He was certain, as food rations dwindled, that there would more unrest and protests. "Men will desert if we can be there to give a lead," he declared. "Everyone looks at everyone else in such situations, but no-one dares to act because of fear of being the first...."

On and on he went, and many of the band - dutifully rather than enthusiastically, Davo suspected - murmured their approval of his sentiments.

"I propose a toast" he exclaimed "Let us drink to taking the fight to the tyrant where he least expects it - his own backyard!"

Some mugs were raised - some half-raised - and Oksima watched Julo carefully for a reaction. Just then, a log collapsed into the red heart of the fire and sent up a burst of crackling sparks to join the stars, illuminating his dour face clearly.

"Sure, Berno" he said, choosing carefully his words "Soon we will make plans.....Soon the nights will draw out...."

He never took his eyes off Oksima and she got the message plainly enough that he thought the enterprise was doomed from the start and that he was humouring his young friend. When Berno paused again for breath Oksima astounded them all - as well as herself - by saying she knew another way. She nudged Davo who started out of his reverie.

"My husband has proof that Neno Yensis is innocent of murder. He took the blame for a conspiracy which was the work of the authorities - almost certainly of Mero Gorkis himself - or of his allies with his full knowledge and approval."

She was grateful the speech she had been formulating had come out so well. All eyes were on her, all mouths agape. The three women studied her beautiful eyes, in which sparks and flames were dancing, as if they would like to do nothing better than scratch them out. Somebody muttered *the beer is too strong for her* and she flinched.

She never touched alcohol, she countered.

"I have witnessed first-hand the misery it causes."

Julo demanded she explain herself. She looked again at Davo who told her she had gone too far to stop there.

“Davo has a letter. The woman Rosima Solcis, the murder victim, was taking it to Yensis in the Dome on the night she was killed. My Davo was a corridor guard.....*You* tell them, Davo!”

“My young friend - the guard on duty - had taken it from her hand as she died. The man who sliced her throat was himself murdered on a higher floor or in the lift. Grano, my friend, was blamed and arrested. He was accused of being an accomplice of Yensis. I took the letter from him and went back to my flat. *There*...I’ve carried that heavy burden around for years.....”

“And I met Yensis,” added Oksima “Years ago. In the forest. He had nothing to do with contraband. He was the victim of a frame-up, involving my drunk of a father who saved his own scabby hide - or thought he had.”

Julo leant forward from the log he was seated on to look Davo squarely in the face.

“And where is this letter? Can this all be true?”

He unbuttoned his shirt and held it over the fire. He asked Julo to promise he could have it back. Julo nodded.

“You will have to hold it with the fire behind it to read it because of her blood.”

Even so, Julo had difficulty because of the flicker of the flames, and Davo recited it, word for word, so that the whole group heard. As soon as he mentioned the man with the red eyelid, someone gasped.

“You had deserted by the time he deposed our commandant, Julo”, said Davo. “And he had that harmless idiot Flenis shot - in front of us all - for insubordination.”

The man who had gasped stood up and looked at him. “Are you all telling me you have no idea who the red-eyed man is? I was a border guard, like you near Jenau. He came to arrest some of our men. He had a red eye. He was called Venegis. It must be the same man. He is Gorkis’s deputy. If the old bastard dies, Venegis will become the Chief Co.”

“The Leader, you mean!” exclaimed Berno in a frenzy of excitement. “Don’t you see what this letter means, if we can make use of it?”

“It means” said Oksima “That you do not have to risk your lives attacking pipelines or raising hell in the City. The letter tells the truth - and that can be a sharper weapon than all the weapons our enemies have.”

Davo held out his hand and took the letter back.

Oksima had a terrible presentiment of danger that night and slept with an eye and an ear open. They had pitched their little tent against a great fir trunk and she had insisted on sleeping on the open side. In the pitch black night she knew that nothing could find its way to them but still she could not relax. Then, as the grey light of dawn washed out the darkness, she sensed someone making a slow and silent approach to them. There was a tiny crack of a twig.....and was there also the sound of breathing?? She pictured the letter inside Davo’s shirt and cursed herself - once again - for speaking of it in front of the whole group. What would it be worth to Gorkis or Venegis? What privileges could it buy? She gripped her hunting knife, ready to strike. Whoever was out there was edging closer, like an intruder carefully mounting a staircase. If he struck first, then it would be her, not Davo who received the blow, and this for some strange reason comforted her. Just as she was ready to slash out at the shadow shape which she took to be a leg, there was a commotion and the shape flew away - and she heard the thud of a something heavy hitting the ground and a gasp of pain. She opened the tent flap, and saw Julo sitting on a man he had thrown. There was a knife nearby.

“Please, Julo” said the man. “I thought I heard someone trying to steal the letter. I

came out to check. It must have been you I heard!”

It was the man who had identified the red-eyed man as Venegis.

“No, Jaro. You never heard me. Nobody ever does. I wondered why they seemed to be expecting us at the oil rig. Ah! Oksima. Your letter has flushed out our rat. Just as I hoped!”

Others, dark shapes, were emerging from tents and shelters. Julo ran his eye over them and shouted to Berno to get everyone out of bed. There was someone missing. A woman. Jaro’s woman, Tula.

“Where is she?” Julo demanded, putting the point of Jaro’s knife to his windpipe.

“She went in the night!” he shouted, suddenly defiant. “Look! Can’t you see it’s hopeless? I can cut us all a good deal. We can say we captured *those two* and found the letter on them. We can live a little. Aren’t you sick of this pointless existence?”

When Julo did not reply, Jaro appealed to the others. But no-one moved.

“Tell me...where...she ...went!” said Julo.

He refused to speak and Julo told them to break camp and be ready to leave in ten minutes. He told Berno to hobble Jaro’s ankles and fetch him a green tunic.

“ And cut down that sapling and sharpen the stump.”

“No-o-o.” moaned Jaro. “She’s gone to the rigs. It was her idea. If you start out now, you can catch her....I’ll come with you.”

But Julo had gone deaf. The group had turned the bend in the river when the pleading stopped. Even though they went quickly, at times almost jogging, sure enough, as they rounded the next bend, there he sat on a tree stump sharpening his knife, with Jaro’s boots tied around his neck.

*

Kalo Devenskis took off his spectacles, having read the letter, looked at Davo, and then at Oksima before blessing the rest with a smile.

“I think, brothers and sisters, we can afford a little celebration. Kill a boar and break open beer jugs.”

Oksima admired his noble face, his kindness, his gravity and obvious integrity. She had seen these qualities in only one man before. She watched Berno embrace his elder brother Temyo as they tearfully made their peace. Julo sat quietly on a boulder in the cave and studied the edge of his blade. He was the practical one, the one who knew that they had no time to feast, that they must leave and cross the river that very night.

“The woman Tula will lead them to us” he announced undramatically.

This sparked a lively debate. Berno wondered whether she would take such a huge risk - contacting the guards on her own when Jaro failed to join her.

“Would such a tale be believed? About an old letter? It might even be enough to get her killed - to keep it hushed up.”

But Julo shook his head. She would lead their enemies to their hideout. What reward might she receive - especially if the letter could be found?

“Yes. But then they would simply kill her - as one of us.” said Temyo. “She is a shrewd woman - remember how she made to seduce that guard as a distraction at Jenau? Her commonsense will overcome her greed.....surely.”

Devenskis spoke quietly. “I hope that she does mention this letter. Don’t you all see? If the truth gets out as a rumour - then it must spread. People believe rumours so as not to appear naïve. And then later, when it is a common belief, this precious letter will provide the proof. Who will question it then? It is a total accident but we could not have planned it better.”

Julo acknowledged the wisdom of this, but repeated that - for the sake of their cause and the sake of the truth - they could not take the risk of staying put one more night. And while the mellow late August weather held, before autumn wet and wind set in, they had to cross the river and find refuge in the dense forests over the border.

The boar was spared and the beer left undrunk.

Devenskis had made up his mind. He rubbed his arthritic knees. The mountainside paths would be too narrow and treacherous for his clumsy gait. He would go deeper into the caves and take his chances. Temyo's English was, he argued, more than adequate, and he could look for Armstrong in Kroniev. They needed to get the letter copied and printed as leaflets - thousands of them.

"Armstrong will know what to do. He will surely have the means and the contacts," he said.

Julo took off his backpack and ushered the others towards the mouth of the cave and the open air.

"Kalo" he said. "You will come with us even if I have to carry you on my back. You were right about the pipeline. I was wrong. We need you. But give me the letter until we are on safe ground."

Darkness had fallen. The entrance to the cave framed the full moon and her two sister stars. The torrent which poured through the mountain cleft, deepened over aeons by persistent melt and storm water, would be their first peril. July and August had been dull but mainly dry, and the river was not in spate. Julo, the strongest swimmer, was confident that he could battle his way across by the moonlight. Months ago, for this very contingency, a long rope had been fashioned from twisted birch bark, wetted, dried, wetted and dried again until it was flexible. It was carried in ten sections in the packs of ten men. At the edge of the river, it was tied together and the end secured around Julo's chest. Grabbing one boulder after another, he inched his way across, and the rest watched in fear and awe, now cheering, now falling silent as his head once again seemed unlikely to bob up from the swells and swirls. Three men had hold of the rope, having wound it once around a smooth birch tree, paying it out little by little as he went, thus also preventing Julo being swept away. At last, he heaved himself onto the bank opposite and waved. Now it was Berno's turn. While Julo secured his end to a pine, Berno scrambled up rocks and, after first slinging on a rope harness to serve as a seat, tied the rope around a smooth tree trunk. The harness was then attached to a makeshift rope of strips of canvas and spare clothing so that it could be yanked back across for the next passenger. The angle of incline was just enough to ferry people over slowly and safely. Friction was reduced by repeatedly greasing the top leather strap of the harness. On the section beyond every knot, a second strap had to be attached by the passenger to the harness and the first one released. It was an ingenious though awkward system, and it took over two hours to carry all thirty-one of them across. Trevo, the oldest member of the group had volunteered to remain behind, and duly undid the end which Berno had tied, and then watched the rope being pulled over the falls to disappear beyond the trees. Thus, no sign remained of their escape, nor any clue of the way they had gone. The rope was dismantled and parts of it packed away to be used on the trails, in case they became narrow or steep ledges. Julo, being also an excellent rock-climber, would be able to tie a rope plus harness to a branch or a trunk so that it would serve as a swing. And, of course, when it was time to return to claim victory, the whole rope would become their bridge once more.

It was long past midnight when they found an area level enough to pitch their tents. Some were so tired that they simply slept where they fell. At dawn, Julo mounted a great rock. As the new day spread westwards, the air on the horizon, clean and clear at that hour, allowed him to see a faint greyness which he decided must be Kroniev. Turning, he heard a clatter from helicopters behind him and saw men descend like tiny green spiders on threads into the trees near the caves. On the eastern horizon, like a tiny blemish on the risen sun, he could make out the prong of the Dome. He smiled and spat in contempt. He watched and measured the landing point of the guards to the entrance to their first cave, imagining their cautious progress through the trees and counting down the seconds. And eventually, when he had gone only thirty past zero, he saw a flash and heard the thunder of the explosion as one of those boots broke the tripwire he had set amongst the rubble. Rooks, like many cinders from a fire, rose as if in noisy celebration. Satisfied, he clambered down to greet those who had stuck their heads out of their tents.

One of their scouts came back with good news that afternoon. On a steep trail he had come across a herd of cattle being driven down to their winter quarters in the valley on their other side of the mountain. He had waited till the trail was clear and then climbed up to a high alm just before a ridge where the trees gave up their march to the summit. There he found the cabin which the herdsman used. On the worst winter nights, maybe fifteen or sixteen of them could cram themselves in. There was a stove in the corner and underneath the floor logs were stacked. Next door, there was a derelict shed which could be patched up to house more of them. It was decided that they would tramp up there the very next day, collecting as much food on the way as they could, before setting their traps in the high woods. Only Temyo would accompany his ailing father to Kroniev, with Julo acting as their guide on the mountain. The Scottish engineer McLeod wanted to know what was being said. After Devenskis had explained their divergent plans, the Scot demanded to go with them. "I stayed in the best hotel there. Where some of the foreign correspondents hang out. I drank with them in the bar. That letter would cause a media sensation - you could name your price. Gorkis would become an international pariah overnight! A Gadafi. An Assad. A Saddam. Remember those charmers?"

This was all explained to Julo who looked McLeod up and down and suppressed a laugh.

"Fock is he smiling at?? I'm half the fellow I was when you so kindly kidnapped me!" He drew in his stomach to prove it. They laughed. When he realised he had still not carried his point, he put his hand inside a little pocket he had made in his green tunic, ex-guard issue. He produced something which puzzled the others.

"I was just wondering how you'd get by without a penny in your pockets in the big, bad city. Well, this, my friends, is called a debit card. It means MONEY. And only I know how to get at it. So, I'm coming. And if anybody knows how to find your friend Armstrong, it'll be one of my drinking companions."

So it was settled. McLeod would come. It remained to be seen how the leaflets could be printed and how they could be smuggled back over the border. *Armstrong would know* became their new mantra. The old motorway had been cleared of its years of weeds and was being used for import traffic. Armstrong would know how to hire a vehicle in Kroniev and who to trust. The imminent problem was to find a convincing cover story for the three men to tell, if challenged by an official or a policeman over yonder. Here again, McLeod was inspired.

"Why not pretend to be exactly what we look like we are? We're three Scots on a hiking holiday. We have boots and backpacks and wonderful green camouflage

jackets. I don't mind doing the talking. I'll teach you a few Scottish expressions and pronunciation as we walk along. We'll get by."

The late August weather held and, although their progress was slow, Kalo and McLeod had less difficulty on the mountainside tracks than had been expected. When his father tired, Temyo carried him on his back. The trail became a narrow ledge only once and Julo overcame the problem by picking his way across the rock face to tie the rope to a thick root for the others to hold as they crossed. The terrain became gentler and when they came upon a well established hiking route, Julo bid them farewell. He would rejoin Berno who had been supervising the setting up of the high camp on the alm. When the hours of darkness and mist had lengthened in their favour, they and three volunteers would set out for the City. One of their number had a cousin who lived in a house on the outskirts, and from there they would begin their propaganda campaign.

"If fortune favours us, Julo, we will bring the leaflets to you in the City in the early new year." declared Kalo Devenskis.

Julo ceremoniously handed over the letter and within seconds had disappeared back into the trees.

*

This account has been adapted (by my secretary Jula) from the memoirs of Kalo Devenskis with the kind permission of his son Temyo.

"When we entered Kroniev we did not attract the attention I had feared. McLeod had no need to ask for directions to the city centre - it drew us in like a magnet. I had been a small child when the old system had collapsed and my memories of traffic and tumult in our City were dim. Temyo was of course not far short of astonished by the din, the hurrying crowds, the impatient cars, lorries and buses, the bad air - and what he later called the apathy in the fixed eyes of many passers-by - *entirely and exclusively active in their own cause*. No-one returned his smiles or nods and he soon learnt to ignore everyone in the same measure that he was ignored. McLeod felt at ease and at home, pushing us almost to cross the roads and to overtake other pedestrians. The buildings were on a different scale to our own and we felt very insignificant compared to the powerful forces and interests which we sensed they represented. Eventually we stood opposite a huge neo-classical edifice which was called the Hotel Metropole. Two men in red uniforms were patrolling and I asked McLeod if they might cross the road to check us. He laughed and told me to watch. A large black car eventually pulled up and one of them opened the door to greet a beautifully dressed man and woman.

"They're only doormen," he said. "They won't arrest us. They just won't let us anywhere near the lobby dressed like this. That's when *what you wear* matters in our part of the planet."

Temyo looked anxious. How could McLeod then make contact with his journalist friends? He winked and beckoned us to follow him. There was some kind of machine in a wall near a bank. He put in his card, entered four numbers and said a prayer. Out of a slot came lots of notes. We stopped outside a department store and Temyo seemed almost drawn in by the counters and displays - the fragrances, the colours and the glitter.

"I'm going in here. There's a park over the road," said McLeod. "Take this twenty

and buy yourselves a hotdog or burger from the kiosk and find a seat well away from the path. I'll be about half-an-hour."

Temyo handled the crisp note and looked at the design. And when he got shiny coins in his change at the kiosk, the fascination in his eyes told me this much: that the lessons of history for our younger generations are no match for novelty. The money did not only have a special allure, it gave him control and the power of decision. It seemed to change him.

"This.....burger is delicious" he whispered as we found a bench under a chestnut tree. I allowed my face to crease in a wistful smile.

At long last, McLeod returned with two large shopping bags. He was wearing a long dark coat which reached almost to his ankles. In the bags was one for both of us. We put them on. And were transformed. We followed him to the fountain where he took a towel and washed his boots clean. We did the same.

"I'm going to check in at the hotel. Give it fifteen minutes. Take my watch. Just walk confidently past the doormen speaking English. If they stop you, mention me by name. You have business with me. I'll be in the lobby. Dump your backpacks under these trees."

As he strode off confidently, I asked Temyo what he thought of a capitalist, consumerist city. "You find it exciting, of course."

For a long time he did not reply, and then said "I admit, it is overwhelming, Father. The goods in the windows, the people with their packages and bags, the rush and restlessness - and relentlessness of everything and everybody. But we would soon tire of it."

"But then want more. It is - at least on the surface - a richer experience, I concede - but there are hidden prices to pay, not just the ones on the labels of the things."

He felt the soft material of the coat and the silky lining, comparing it with the coarseness of what he wore underneath. He shook his head as if ashamed. His lip trembled as he spoke. "Father. It is impossible! How *shall* we live for the best? There has been dictatorship - benevolent and malevolent - plebiscite, representative democracy, committee ruleAll eventually fail. The State, I think, becomes too populous or unwieldy to manage. I see it as trying to balance a mountain on its peak. Do we not need to be small scale and self-ruling? We need a new idea."

"No. That is communism. How can the commune satisfy all its needs? The modern State is a necessity - for good and ill. Does this country have more of one than of the other? Did ours? If there is a flaw, it lies in the way the young are taught and raised. Never lose sight of the words of the Mentor, Temyo. "*A community is vulnerable whenever there is one man who cannot think for himself.*"

"I remember, Father. "*Disaster awaits the ninety-nine green thinkers, if there is only one blank.*" Such a blank person will obey the orders of a tyrant.....a tyrant who *has* thought for himself and reached the "wrong" conclusion - wrong as far as you or I or the rest of the good community is concerned. So there may be ninety-seven green thinkers, two blanks and one blood red - our beloved Gorkis. A perfect society is impossible."

"No, Temyo! There must be a way - and a place - for like-minded people to live a good, peaceful life together. One day."

"But - until then - the conflicts within need to be contained in political parties...to control the strands and give structure and hence some kind stability....You know already that I have been thinking this..."

I closed my eyes and saw darkness - which became a vast forest stretching on for ever, in which only isolated plumes of smoke rose, from a scattering of people. "Only

there,” I muttered “Would a politics not exist. Only then would there be peace. You are right, Temyo.”

My son asked me what I meant but I cannot for the life of me remember what - or if - I replied. He did not repeat the question but watched the second hand of the watch tick around the silver face, framed in a ring of gold. His eyes told me the same story as before. I told him to look at the tall grey and blue buildings beyond the park and the centre of the city.

“How content do you think the people are who live there, Temyo? Those people with the fixed stares you mentioned?”

He shrugged and got to his feet. He said it was time to go and rejoin McLeod. I would do the talking. Luckily, the doorman did not look at our boots and his English was rudimentary. We were in.

We followed McLeod to a plush room where from a deep pocket he produced a bottle of whiskey. I saw that Temyo was tempted to join him in a glass but a look of disappointment from me was enough to dissuade him. While we talked, the Scot drank nearly half the bottle. After we had refused the spirit, he offered us coffee which we found very bitter. Wine and fruit juice from the refrigerator were enough. He ordered dinner to be served in his room and there was enough for us all. We had hidden in the bathroom while it was brought in. After the meal, he telephoned to the reception to ask if a certain Mr Thomas of the London Times was in the bar. He was, and he was soon on his way up. It turned out that he had taken a particular interest in the case of Neno Yensis. We translated the letter for him and he took it to reception to be copied. Money was offered but we refused it. The emergence of the truth would be reward enough for all of us. Thomas knew the whereabouts of Neville Armstrong and in the dark early hours, after a phone call, we bid farewell to a drunken McLeod and were met in the side-street by one of Armstrong’s men.

Armstrong looked older than sixty-three. He was balding and had an unhealthy pallor. He struggled sometimes to get his breath. But he welcomed us enthusiastically to his hostel and listened avidly to our tales and exploits. We were taken aback to hear he was the uncle of Neno Yensis. So far as we knew, we assured him, his nephew was still alive. Temyo was eager to hear about London and Armstrong told him how, as in Kroniev, just a few streets separated the very rich from the very poor.

“The police keep the poor at bay in the night. Every summer one or more of the shabby quarters goes up in flames. The other towns and cities have been deserted by the better-off. A democracy like ours is okay if you have money. You are free to be rich and even freer to be poor.”

Temyo was disappointed but I felt relief that he was. We translated our letter for our host and he was delighted to hear that the reporter had taken a copy. Then our spirits fell when he revealed that he had no magic formula for carrying leaflets across the border.

“To get the leaflets printed here is not a problem. Transporting them is. Private cars are not allowed across the border and only a few haulage firms are licensed to carry goods and materials in. The nearest is on the outskirts. To get a man of ours inside would be difficult. It is wisest not to trust the locals.”

“Are you really under surveillance?” asked Temyo.

“We were. Until they realised we posed no threat to their cosy relationship with Mero Gorkis. I was interrogated once because of rumours we were training your refugees as terrorists. I invited the police in. They looked inside and around the grounds - this

used to be a hotel - and found nothing. My guests are asylum seekers - I find them jobs as domestics and gardeners amongst those in my organisation who sympathise with your Idea. They break no laws and are no burden. Under European Treaty the authorities here can do nothing unless we give them cause. The police sit outside occasionally for the sake of appearances. As for me, I have the right to be in Kroniev - as a European citizen."

"So there is freedom here!" declared Temyo. "We were told in school that people abroad are slaves of wages, propaganda and consumerism."

"Let me put it this way, Temyo. As long as you are of no consequence, you are free. You are free to be of no consequence! It is like the freedom of a bird. Become a pest like the pigeons on the main square and your freedom will be curtailed. I am not a pest - at least on the surface. I am therefore of no consequence. If some official in a remote office decided that was no longer the case, I would be on my way. I have to be, as we say, as clean as a whistle. Of course, they have no idea of my connection to Neno and what I intend to do with the weapons I've been accumulating in the cellar."

The late autumn trees lost their leaves one stormy night and when we looked out at dawn it was winter. After the sensational news of the accusations against Gorkis had faded, and weeks of inaction in our hostel ensued, Temyo became ever more morose and gloomy. Armstrong told us to expect this - that last week's news was no news at all. He showed us a copy of *The Times* which carried a statement from Gorkis condemning the conspiracy story as a pack of lies spread by terrorists. The raid on the hotel Armstrong was expecting came not long afterwards. While we sat trembling in the dark attic, we heard beds and cupboards being dragged across the floor below.

"They wouldn't tell me what they were looking for, but it was pretty obvious," said Armstrong as soon as we had climbed down. "I am a convincing liar. I told them no new people had come and that I knew nothing about how the smear against Gorkis had got out. They are rattled. And that means we have to act - before we are declared vermin."

Within three days, the lucky break for which we had been waiting arrived.

Armstrong told us to come and look. We followed him out into the yard where he had parked his car. He bolted the tall gates and opened the boot. There were twenty bundles tied with string. He pulled out a leaflet for us to read - a copy of the statement we had written with an inset picture of the letter.

"There are ten thousand here" he said. "Enough?"

"Ten thousand! Of course...but how can we deliver them in your car?"

"We won't. Our delivery service will. Our friend Tomenskis finally got himself a job - as a night loader at that haulage firm I told you about. All we need to do is to put these in a packing case and address it to that house where your friends are staying. I'm sure the driver could be persuaded to drop this off at the right place if a thousand was promised at the end."

"But Purkis and Berno have no money."

"No. But *you* do. Here."

He counted out ten hundred notes and gave them to me.

"Both of you are going back over as well," he said.

We waited until the early hours and drove to the lorry yard, stopping about fifty metres short. Security was slack because, as Armstrong assured us, the number of

people wanting to return or escape to our country was very limited - limited to us. Armstrong whistled and a few moments later the workman Tomenskis appeared with a sack barrow to trundle our package through the gates. No-one challenged him and soon we followed, dodging between lorries and stacks of pallets until we saw the vehicle destined to deliver us from evil. Tomenskis told us the driver had been briefed and bribed and was in the refreshments cabin across the way. We climbed on board and worked our way to the space at the front which had been reserved for us behind other cargo. At the last moment, we heard heavy breathing as another person struggled in the dim light to climb over.

"I just decided to come with you" whispered Armstrong. "I'm fed up here, and I've never been to your country."

The Reckoning

"Neno Yensis. You have been recalled to this tribunal for review of your sentence in view of recent developments. Your original transgressions need to be seen in a new light. The Opposition has not grown weaker and indeed it is now rampant in some parts of our City. Your accomplices have printed leaflets to spread lies. I hold up this copy as evidence. Walls are defaced with absurd slogans - proclaiming your innocence - you, who confessed so freely to his crimes! And now comes the greatest outrage - the cowardly assassination of our Chief Coordinator Mero Gorkis!"

At the mention of this name, many in the assembly cried out in anger and what sounded like grief until the president called for order before continuing

"I am convinced that if Mero Gorkis could now speak, he would concede that he was too generous in sparing your life, Neno Yensis - you, the focus of the Oppositionists. *He* cannot speak - so this tribunal must speak for him."

As the president of the tribunal droned on, I glanced around me. I was in the Great Hall on the ground floor of the Dome where the annual convention of all the committees had been held in our years of celebration. The yes-men and yes-women were packed on the benches which ascended behind me. They looked smart and well fed. Their hostility radiated in my face like a hot fire. Yet it must have been synthetic, for who amongst them - all intellectuals - was not aware of the corruption of the Idea? Hypocrites! Had they not prospered as the people grew poorer?

Seeing that I was ignoring him, the president had paused. I looked from one to the other judge seated behind the front bench - two to each side of him - and laughed at those petty people - narrow-eyed and low-browed. My laughter stirred the embers of enmity behind me - some called *shame* and something struck me on the back.

"Mr Yensis," intoned the president "You fail to appreciate the gravity of your situation. Our new Chief Coordinator Leno Venegis has called for your sentence to be.....*amended*. What you say now will weigh for or against you with us. If you repudiate those criminals and condemn their actions before this gathering of the committees - and, furthermore, if you repeat such words to be recorded and broadcast to the people, calling for an end to the rebellion, then we might find it possible to show mercy to you, and allow you to return to your cell."

I was totally unprepared for this, as my first ramblings written in the court protocol show. Then, thoughts of Hela, driven to emigrate, of my dear mother and father, one driven to suicide and one to madness, and the memory of the fear in Andia's face, of the persecution and probable execution of my gentle cellmate Marenkis - as all of these thoughts and many more paraded through my mind, I was forced to pause. I saw that I was merely being used by Venegis, to be quietly eliminated, no doubt, once the rebellion had ceased. My old spirit rose in me, I turned my back on the judges and

began again.

“Ladies and gentlemen. You purport to be believers in the Idea. But I wonder how many of you have tried tobacco and brandy. You forget what keen noses we non-abusers have. I can smell it on you.”

Some jeered. Many looked grave.

“Madam. I see you are wearing a watch. There is no point *now* in pulling down your sleeve! And you, madam - what a beautiful necklace.....What very fine people you all are, all made up. Look at me in my cotton prison tunic. Am *I* adorned? Do *I* smell of perfume? Let me inhale you.....Ah, wonderful....How jealous I am. How I miss those things *essential* to the good life....those things I am supposed to have smuggled in.....You Sir, you are a little.....overweight? I am being polite. Do you eat soft white bread or that grey matter fed to the people?”

I surveyed them all. “Your calling was to run the System as altruists and Alphas, so that the people - lesser than you in their intellect - and I quote here from the first volume of the Mentor - *so that the people might live in peace, prosperity, contentment and freedom, without the fear of such evils in the world as war, poverty, drudgery and repression*. You have failed them. You have failed the Mentor, your teachers and your parents too. You have failed your vocation and your intelligence. I will not condemn the rebellion....I condemn only you, who are corrupt.”

I turned back to the Bench, just in time to see a curtain move in an upstairs balcony seat - and the flash of a red eye?

“I confessed many years ago because I was being blackmailed by a man with a strange red birthmark under one eye. At stake were my sister, her husband and my nieces - and the father of the woman I loved. Now I am no longer in the grip of that unscrupulous man. I tell you now that I was not guilty of any of those crimes. I was and am the evangelist. I do not know the names or faces of any of the men or women I am accused of leading and inspiring. I can only name you one Oppositionist. His name is.....”

The whole room held its breath. I looked at my feet as if in the process of recollection, and suddenly raised my head and jabbed my finger at the curtain...

“He is a man who opposes all that is decent and life-sustaining. He opposes the wellbeing of the people. His vocation is greed. His one and only positive act was to destroy his vile predecessor, Gorkis. His name is....Venegis!”

There were shouts again of protest. I waited until the tumult died away.

“If I was the evangelist, he is the devil incarnate. I will go to my death now with an easy conscience.....Will *he*? Do as you have planned it. It is finished.”

The president rose and addressed me.

“Neno Yensis. Your intransigence and defiance are noted. We will now come to a decision.”

The other four stood with him in a huddle and pretended to discuss me. It was absurd. After a minute their unanimous verdict was announce to general acclaim. The following morning I would be taken to the Central park and shot in public. To my surprise, a few disparate, disembodied voices said *No* but these were drowned by an uproar of approval. As I looked around, I spotted Andia sitting in one high corner. I raised my hand and smiled to tell her that I bore no grudge - only good memories of our passion and friendship.

While I was being taken down in the lift, the lift whose winding gear was housed in the head of the Dome - since my infancy an ever present and inspirational icon - the feeling of irony was very poignant. There were other feelings too - regret, fear and anger being the chief amongst them - but dominating them all was one of relief. I had

had my final say and soon I would be free.

*

My personal dawn light flickered on and woke me. The pain in my legs which would eventually cripple me set in again. As soon as I had had my breakfast of thin porridge, my good friend the doctor arrived, to make sure, as I jested to him, that I was fit to be shot. He told me it was a cold morning and held out a pullover for me to wear beneath my tunic. I told him it was a pity that it was only February the fifth - I would have liked to see a few bulbs breaking in the park.

“You know the date, Neno? After all this time??”

“I’ve been counting. They never broke me.”

He told me he had been sent to enquire if I had a last request - I would leave in fifteen minutes. When I told him I would like to see a priest he was astonished.

“A priest? Are you a religious man?”

“I think I might be.”

“I think sometimes, I might be too. My mother used to whisper the Lord’s Prayer to me. I think I remember it. Shall I?”

He prayed it and I followed. Afterwards I felt braver, calmer. We embraced and he left me. Not long after his departure, I was escorted by two silent guards along the corridor and I called to mind my very first arrest on my corridor, many floors above, many, many years ago. Then I had been afraid of losing everything. Now there was nothing to lose and my fear was slight. Many men and women had taken this walk - in the distant and recent past, here and elsewhere. Some had been villains, many heroes. The leers and jeers of those put in place to harass me as I passed did not disconcert me. Such half and quarter-people had always been stationed on scaffold walks, and it was easy and sensible to ignore them, these beings who were incapable of empathy, generosity and appreciation of the Idea. If there was a merciful God, he had surely manufactured them without a soul - a tangle of limbs and little else - with some ancillary role to play in the world, as shadows to enhance His celebration of bright virtue. And on the ground floor I was welcomed by a golden stranger to me in all those years - the low sun peeking shyly through the windows.

“The evangelist! Here comes the evangelist!” shouted a woman. “Save yourself, evangelist Yensis!”

The sight of the City was a shock to me. Some walls were rubble. Where there had been neat grass verges there were rutted expanses of winter-fractured weeds. Some walls were cracked and windows were smashed or boarded up. Graffiti on walls had been painted out but had reappeared. Although some of it was in favour of me, I still hated to see it. It was if the wretched hands of the Old Time had reached through the ground and strangled the beauty of the New.

I was pushed onto a lorry and had a placard hung around my neck which I did not read. My expectation had been of crowds of citizens howling along my route but instead small groups stood shivering in glowering silence for the most part. The most exciting event was when a top window opened and I was drenched by stinking water. One of my companion guards laughed. We entered the broad tree-lined avenue where I had once strolled with Andia on summer days to the Central Park. Of course, the plane trees were tortured and skeletal in February. Beyond the railings I could see shivering crowds waiting and watching for me. A platform had been erected for the coordinating committee, and reminded me of a medieval jousting scene I had come

across in a history book at first school.

I looked from one grim face to the next. One of their number, a woman whose name eluded me, had been a silent and watchful member of our Surplus Committee. By her caution she had risen! The lorry chuckled and stopped. I was taken to a pole and tied to it. Twenty guards in green uniforms marched onto the lawn, headed by a soldier in dark green. He had grey side whiskers and intense eyes.

“You have, Neno Yensis, the right to be blindfolded,” he announced.

Looking down from the blue sky in which an arrowhead of geese was flying, I smiled at the soldier. I told him I was grateful for the kind offer, but I wanted to die looking at the escaping geese, if he did not object.

“I bear you no grudge, Officer. Do your duty. I am ready. My conscience is clear and I pray that yours will not trouble you in years to come.”

He laid his trembling hand on my shoulder and squeezed it. In all those long years I had been deprived of such affection and an involuntary sob overcame me. Many in the crowd took this to be the sorrow of fear and some hooted. The soldier whispered an apology.

“I am sorry that I must do this - but you are to be denied the right of last words.”

The blindfold became a gag and was tied around my mouth. I looked around. The ordinary people were a sorry sight in general - scantily dressed and pinched by the cold. I sensed that they were there by invitation which it would have been unwise to decline. Around the perimeter of the park stood guards with rifles held across their chests, fingers near triggers. They were not there to shoot at *me*. Then my eyes arrived again at the podium about twenty metres away, where the red-eyed man was getting to his feet.

“This man, Neno Yensis is a hypocrite” he boomed. “He and his allies have stolen the food from your mouths. He advocated the decimation of the populace - here in my hand I have the signed minutes of that committee meeting - so that a greater surplus than already existed could be traded for brandy and tobacco. From his cell, through accomplices - for example, his doctor who was dealt with this very morning - he plotted the death of our leader Mero Gorkis.”

At the mention of Gorkis the crowds began to sob and wail - but cried no tears. With a mixture of dismay and disgust - and yes, with amusement - I looked at those in contortions around me. In that instant, my faith in the people died - and my faith in the Idea. Even those on the podium affected to grieve, but not the firing squad and not Venegis - who now held up his hand, at which the grief miraculously stopped.

“Citizens, your grief does you credit. Have we not all seen that vile slogan painted on our City walls - DEATH TO GORKIS? Who, I ask, painted it? Not this coward Yensis, of course, but his conspirators! It confirms his influence beyond the cell in which he was kept. In the same cold manner as he contrived the death of Mero Gorkis, he planned the murder of his committee rival Luzo Gorkis - and even of his erstwhile friend Rosima Curcis when she discovered the truth. He refuses to call an end to the rebellion which causes you to starve. In the name of the people, Commander Lovenskis, I order you to carry out the sentence of the tribunal.”

The commander held his hand out straight, ready to release a white handkerchief which put me sadly in mind of a dove. He surveyed the podium, the crowd and finally me before speaking. “Squad, when the handkerchief touches the ground you will fire as you have been instructed.”

It seemed to linger in the mid-air and was caught by a sudden breeze. I thought I was fainting. But it was the ground which was swaying. Voices cried *earthquake* and there were screams as the podium shook and buildings wobbled. Even the Dome trembled a

little. Tiles in a nearby street crashed to the ground. The world groaned and then there was silence. Venegis had fallen to his knees - maybe out of fear. The handkerchief had landed and I watched the execution squad raise their rifles to their shoulders - when suddenly they swung around and it was not me, but Venegis who was jerking in a dance of death. The guards on the perimeter threw their weapons to the ground when a second and a third volley were aimed just over their heads. Lovenskis held his hand up for the attention of all as he mounted the podium, pistol in hand.

“Citizens, do not be afraid.” he said as he rolled over the lifeless body of Venegis with his boot. “Here at my feet lies the murderer of Mero Gorkis, not the man tied to the pole. This man here was the one who had the bomb planted aboard Gorkis’s aircraft in his greed for power. The soldier who acted for him confessed his crime to me. All you have read on the walls and in this leaflet is true. Before Venegis, Gorkis was the drunken leader of the Opposition to the Idea. Neno Yensis is truly innocent. Our oil and gas were sold to enrich these men and their cronies while the only benefit for you was the damage caused by earth tremors! As I speak, New Loyalists under the orders of my fellow officers are disarming the old green guards and occupying key points in the City. Food stores kept for the privileged will be shared by all. Go to your homes and await radio announcements.”

I had been untied and began for the first time that morning to shiver. The crowd was soon melting away while those on the podium were being handcuffed. My attention was drawn to a group of armed people entering the park. There was a tall, slender woman, unusually blonde and beautiful; next to her two shorter men, one stockier than the other with a great gun over his shoulder; then three men in dark overcoats, one quite squat and portly, whose gait was unmistakably the same as my dear mother’s. He spoke to me in English and grabbed my hand.

“Congratulations, nephew. At last you are free. These brave people never gave up. This man is Davo Puskis. It was he who kept the flame of the truth burning all these years and who carried the letter - the real letter - which Rosima Curcis was bringing to you on the night she died.”

He broke into our language and urged Davo to step forward and take the honour of showing the letter to me. Davo smiled and laid it with ceremony in my hand. I held it up against the low sun and, through Rosima’s blood, read her words with emotion, words which would have prevented - or at least greatly hindered the scheming of Mero Gorkis. What different chain of events would it have set in motion, had she delivered it? The postscript which mentioned Luzo Gorkis caused me to speculate on the how and the why of his death*. My uncle introduced me to the two brothers - the sons of Kalo Devenskis, who was too exhausted to be present.

“And this is Julo - who organized the slogans and the leafleting.”

In turn I thanked them all. The commander jumped down and joined us. We were invited to accompany him to the Dome where the committee members would be forced to inspect what he called the bloody results of their treachery. He told me I would be restored to my old accommodation overlooking the plains. I shook my head. I only wanted to return to my parents’ village home. I tried to walk a few steps but a question made me stop.

“Who will rule now, Commander Lovenskis? You?”

“Not I!” he declared. “We will only rule until new committees are formed.”

“And who will form them?”

**It has never been explained and I would prefer to believe that he was murdered in the act of trying to have me exonerated from blame.*

“I hoped you might, Neno Yensis. We had been hoping that you would be the new Chief Co.”

“No. I have lost my faith in men. I have no judgement. I have done with them all. Just let me retire to grow tomatoes and watch the clouds and the birds passing.”

I walked past him with difficulty and stumbled. I felt myself being lifted up and carried. I watched another skein of geese fly over and seemed, by some miracle, to join them.

* * *

I had been dreaming of Andia. But it was my lovely secretary who was stroking my head when I woke.

“You went to sleep, Neno Yensis. Are we honestly finished? Should we not tell of how the oil and gas was used to buy food for the starving and medicine for the ill? The wisdom of Lovenskis’s rule? The new democracy and economy? The formation of Temyo Devenskis’s Christian Liberal Party? ”

“No, Jula. That is for another historian to write.”

“But what about the free commune of Davo and Oksima Puskis? Berno’s suicide - never explained? And the death of your uncle and Kalo Devenskis? The emigration of Julo Parknis to fight in the African war? Surely you should mention the return of your sister Hela to be our Logistics Minister! That must be important for you.”

“Of course it is important - all these events are. But this is more a history than a saga. One perhaps for you to write or add if you wish, when I am gone. I am very tired and can hardly think. Would you be kind and push me out to sit in the evening sun until it sets? I wish to write one last sentence and that will do for today. Have you a pen and paper?”

*

Dear Jula,

I hope you can read what I have scrawled.

I conclude this history in the solemn hope that Man - having conquered all his mountainous challenges, having invented all his machines and been on all his journeys near and far, may one day cast off all those things which truly burden rather than please him; I pray to God that he may come full circle home. And, that when he is ready, he will revive The Idea.

Good night,

Neno Yensis

