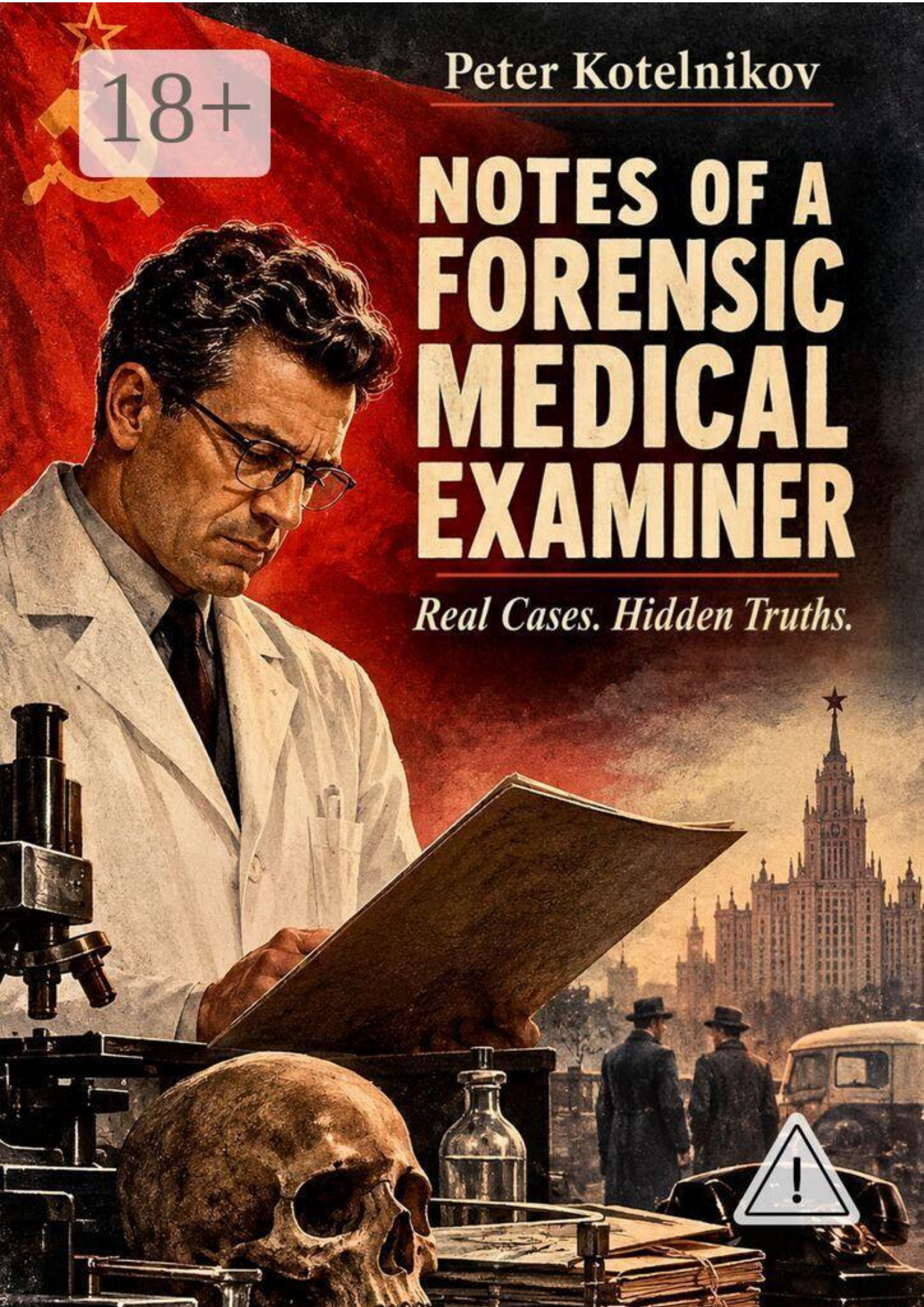
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Peter Kotelnikov

NOTES OF A FORENSIC MEDICAL EXAMINER

Real Cases. Hidden Truths.



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Notes of a Forensic Medical Examiner

«Издательские решения»

Kotelnikov P. P.

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НЕЗАКОННОЕ ПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ НАРКОТИЧЕСКИХ СРЕДСТВ, ПСИХОТРОПНЫХ ВЕЩЕСТВ, ИХ АНАЛОГОВ ПРИЧИНЯЕТ ВРЕД ЗДОРОВЬЮ, ИХ НЕЗАКОННЫЙ ОБОРОТ ЗАПРЕЩЕН И ВЛЕЧЕТ УСТАНОВЛЕННУЮ ЗАКОНОДАТЕЛЬСТВОМ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬ.Real Cases. Hidden Truths.Drawing on 19 years in forensic medicine, Peter Kotelnikov recounts extraordinary cases from Soviet life — deception, revenge, greed, fatal mistakes, and secrets behind official conclusions. A gripping look at forensic investigation and human nature.

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Notes of a Forensic Medical Examiner

Peter Petrovich Kotelnikov

Editor Oleg Petrovich Kotelnikov

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What Drives Us?

What drives humanity? Virtue? Kindness is not held in particularly high regard by humankind. How many rulers of the world have ever been adorned by this epithet? Two or three, perhaps — and even they, if shown to the world without embellishment, would more likely pass for Mephistopheles' assistants.

Throughout the ages, evil has held sway more often than not in human society. And the laws governing that society consisted of rules designed to protect evil.

Violence against the human body and the human mind has been one of the means by which those laws are enforced. People have tried to break free of their grip in the name of both "good" and "evil," unaware that the two are bound together.

It is no wonder that the rules of social conduct have always been broken. Find me a truly devout believer who has never once transgressed the Lord's commandments. Look at films today. Who is the hero? Whom does the audience secretly sympathise with? Whom does it aspire to resemble? Why does the cult of violence flourish? Who cultivates it, and for what purpose? Has anyone ever spared a thought for the victim? Has anyone paused, even for a moment, to imagine what a person experiences when they are raped or robbed of life by the most savage means? The victims — the wretched, the crippled — are merely the backdrop against which the modern Jack the Ripper takes center stage.

I used to work as a forensic medical examiner. With whom did I deal first and foremost? Whom did I examine, and whom did I assess? The victim. I felt compassion for them; I suffered with them; I was outraged by rapists and murderers. That outrage, that compassion, helped me enormously in my work. Perhaps that is why I was so rarely mistaken.

As you read these notes, do not imagine some seasoned professional at work. Yes, I was a professional, but I was young, and extraordinarily energetic. How many nights did I spend without sleep — and the nights when I managed only a few hours hardly bear counting. I saw good people, people who had lost their way by chance, and outright brutes who scarcely deserved to be called human.

Every case described here really happened. These events, and the lives caught up in them, passed through my soul and through my hands. I do not deny that my view of an event may be subjective. I invite you, however, to look at these cases for yourselves, from a different angle.

In many places I have changed the names of the people involved, so as not to hurt their relatives, who are not responsible for the actions of their loved ones. Where I know for certain that no such relatives remain, I have left the names untouched. Nor have I changed the surnames of the prosecutors and police officers with whom I worked. They were not famous men, but they did their jobs. And I must admit that very few among them worshipped the Golden Calf. They amassed neither mansions nor fortunes. Many were gone before their time, and not of their own choosing. May this book be a small candle burning in memory of their goodness and their light.

The First Round

I entered forensic medicine because I was afraid. Afraid of causing pain, afraid of causing death. But I had neither the time nor the means to search for a profession that might suit me better. And so I found myself wearing the mantle of a forensic medical examiner.

I liked the respect people showed me despite my youth. There were, of course, costs to the profession — things no one knew about and no one ever would. Yet one experience stayed with me for the rest of my life: the first autopsy I performed on my own.

No, there was no smell of crime about that case. There was, however, a stench so overpowering that every member of the forensic medical staff fled their offices and went outside. I was left alone with the body, not knowing how to approach it.

The dead woman had been found in a small house standing deep inside a little garden, some twenty meters from the pavement. The house was discovered by smell, when the odor finally reached the street. I will spare you a description of the deceased's appearance. But while performing the autopsy, I vomited three times. Waves of retching doubled me over, and I rushed to the sink. Having emptied my stomach, I returned to the body. It seemed I had brought up everything I had eaten over the previous three days.

I switched on a fan. It did nothing but spread the stench around the room. When I finished the autopsy, I could barely stand. For the rest of the day I felt as though the foul smell was coming from me; I kept away from passers-by.

But I had won the first round in my encounter with forensic medicine. After that, no degree of decomposition could drive me away from an examination. I searched for the truth — and found it!

I Search for an Answer…

I search and cannot find an answer to the question: Is a person's encounter with misfortune predetermined, or is it entirely a matter of chance? I try to make sense of the events I have witnessed in my life.

A blizzard in the city. The wind hurls handfuls of snow into my face. I can hardly breathe; the wind takes my breath away. I turn my back to it so that I can catch my breath for a moment. Every step is a struggle. I have to lean sharply forward to overcome the resilient wall of air, as though it were alive. The wind sweeps snow from the rooftops, burying me from above as well. Kuibyshev is a huge city, but today it seems deserted; only a few solitary pedestrians are moving about. Ahead of me, a woman walks bent almost double. I cannot tell whether she is young or old. She is no more than five meters away. Leo Tolstoy Street comes to an end, and ahead I can see the station square, where the snow whirls furiously. Suddenly, right before my eyes, a stone falls from the roof of a tall brick building. If only it would veer aside by even ten centimeters! No. It falls straight onto the woman's head. For a few moments I watch her body convulse; then it goes still. I run up to her, but it is too late — she is dead. Even after many years, one question remains unanswered for me: was it an accident? I cannot stand that word; it carries a sense of hopelessness. And what can take its place?

I am standing two meters from a tractor whose engine is running unevenly. The tractor driver is trying to adjust the motor. The flywheel starter spins so fast that its movement merges into a white streak of steel. I raise my left hand to brush back my hair, and something whistles past beneath my arm. With a loud clang, the flywheel — a heavy, thick metal disc — buries itself in the wall of a house about fifty meters away. Had it veered just a little to the right, it would have pierced my chest. If I had not raised my hand at that moment, I would have lost my arm. Was it not meant to be?

Georgy Katsko, an old friend of mine, was driving an old, well-traveled Volga taxi. He had been behind the wheel for only two months; before that, he had managed the physical-culture group at the Kerch bus and taxi depot. He brought a passenger to the Kerch railway station.

The passenger asked the driver to wait while he arranged his travel documents. While the man was away, Katsko lifted the hood, probably because he had heard an unusual noise coming from the engine. He bent forward, and at that moment the fan came loose. One of its blades struck him, crushing his frontal bone; part of his brain spilled out. A tall, handsome man, in the prime of life and in full health, was dead. Fate — or chance?

And to put an end to this rhetorical question, I will tell you about an incident that happened to me and radically changed my entire worldview.

A hot, hot summer day. Having gotten a good tan and swum to my heart's content in the sea at the village of Yurkino, situated fourteen kilometers from the city of Kerch, I am driving home in my own Moskvich-412. My wife and grandson are in the back seat. I like driving fast, and although the road is not particularly suited to it, I am traveling at about eighty kilometers per hour. The car runs smoothly; through the open window, a pleasant breeze blows over my body. My thoughts revolve around a glass of wine and something to eat.

I pass the village of Baksu, which lies to my left. The car easily climbs a slight rise. The terrain ahead is hidden from view, but then it opens up before me…

The lane on my side of the road is occupied by a dark-cherry Zhiguli. It has not pulled over to the shoulder, as it should have done. A group of people is standing beside it on the left, while a truck is coming towards me. There is no time to think, and there is no way out. I cannot reduce my speed by braking; there is not enough distance.

If I swerve to the left, I will hit the people or collide head-on with the truck. Hitting the stationary Zhiguli is no solution either. There is no hope, so I decide to squeeze past the Zhiguli on the right, with barely any clearance, although it is a hopeless undertaking… For on the right of the

Zhiguli lies a ditch, and the gap between it and the car is far too narrow. The ditch is densely lined with trees on both sides, making it impossible for a car to squeeze through.

It is fairly narrow but very deep. On the road side, its edge is steep; on the opposite side, it slopes gently. Beyond it lies a collective-farm field and piles of stones that are ploughed up and gathered together.

I am describing all this at length, whereas I had been given only fractions of a second to act.

My car takes off into the air. I cannot change the direction of the wheels; the green crown of a tree is flying towards me. I see everything clearly, distinctly, as though it is happening not to me but to someone else, or as though I am watching scenes from a film. I remain absolutely calm.

At the last second, it seems to me that a gigantic hand has lifted the car into the air and set it down…

A jolt. The engine stalls. I ask my family, "Are you hurt?"

"No!"

And indeed, not one of us has so much as a scratch or a bruise.

The car is positioned exactly perpendicular to the ditch. Fairly thick trees stand on either side of it, a meter from the body. The boot rests on one edge of the ditch, while the front end has sunk gently into the earth on the opposite side. I look at it, unable to believe my eyes. It simply cannot have ended up like this! The car is practically hanging in mid-air.

I lower my legs and jump down, but my feet cannot reach the ground, so I climb up onto the road. It is deserted. Neither the Zhiguli nor the oncoming truck is there.

I hitch a ride and travel in a passing car to see my friend in Adzhimushkai. Fortunately, he is at home. We take shovels and two wide, thick planks. In his car, accompanied by another helper — a neighbor, a strong, stocky man — we return to the scene of the accident.

They look at it and, like me, cannot believe their eyes. Such a thing is impossible, neither in practice nor in theory.

We dig the front end out a little, place the planks under the wheels, and tow the car out of the ditch. Apart from two scratches left by the tree's thorns, the car has no damage. I start the engine and drive away.

For me, the question has been settled: from a convinced atheist, I have crossed over to the ranks of believers. I have had more than enough trials since then, and the more tormenting they became, the stronger my faith in a heavenly intelligence grew.

And the question still remains: Is everything predetermined, or is there nevertheless…?

A Mysterious Death

Many ordinary people have the mistaken idea that a forensic medical examiner deals only with death — and only with the kind known as violent death, which is further divided into accident, suicide and homicide. At times, distinguishing one from another is extraordinarily difficult. In the past, it was customary for a forensic examiner, in addition to the formal report, to write a separate opinion in which he set out his detailed opinion on the circumstances of the case. That opinion often contained many times more information than the report itself. I shall not debate the decision to abolish this document, which confined the forensic examiner's subjective view of each individual case. But I believe that, had it remained, the world might have seen more great figures in forensic medicine, such as Tardieu, Ollenhauer and Hofmann, or a forensic psychiatrist of the stature of Krafft-Ebing. In our country, pathologists working in thanatology were divided into forensic medical examiners and pathologists proper. The latter deal exclusively with non-violent deaths. How artificial this division is! If one takes stock of a forensic examiner's work, non-violent deaths account for at least forty percent of it. And such deaths can be far more mysterious than violent ones. In a violent death, the cause is at least outwardly apparent: someone was crushed, drowned, shot or stabbed. But what can one say when death is sudden or unexpected and nothing is visible? A person was healthy — and then, all at once, dead.

Take a man who served in the army and coped easily with all the physical demands placed on him. He returned home, went hunting, began to skin a hare he had shot — and suddenly turned pale, fell down and died. At the autopsy I found a ruptured aneurysm of the thoracic aorta. The question immediately arises: why had the medical board at the military enlistment office failed to detect such a serious condition when he was accepted for service? Why had the doctors at his unit not found it while he was alive? Or consider another case. The distinguished archaeologist and professor Haidukevich came to Kerch. While visiting the ancient settlement of Panticapaeum, he suddenly felt ill, collapsed and died. At autopsy, once again, I found a ruptured aneurysm — this time in the aortic arch. But why now? He had climbed Mount Mithridates dozens of times and had never complained of ill health. And how often have I heard relatives of the deceased ask:

"Doctor, what did he die of? He was never ill, never complained of anything. He came home from work, lay down to rest — and never got up again!"

"How can this be? I was talking to him just a moment ago. I called again, and they told me he was dead!"

"He sat down to watch television and asked me to bring him some tea. By the time the tea had brewed, he was gone!"

I hear questions like these, or others much like them, all the time. And complaints about medical staff in connection with this kind of death are plentiful.

"But he was a strong, healthy man! And they couldn't save him!"

"What can these doctors do, anyway? All they know how to do is write prescriptions! They let a man like that slip through their fingers!"

How do you explain it to people in a way they can understand, when they are not ready to take anything in? This is not the moment when they can calmly weigh an explanation. They are shattered by the sudden death of someone close to them. In their eyes, the whole world is to blame — including God Himself. He is blamed for not protecting their loved one, for not keeping him safe, for taking him away at last. How can one explain that the sudden death of a loved one is no more mysterious than the things they see around them? There stands an apple tree. All its apples are green, but one at the edge has turned yellow. Why? Unless you cut it open and examine it, you cannot know whether a worm has got inside or the little branch supporting it has cracked. In autumn, all the leaves wither, turn yellow and fall. But why should the leaves on that tree turn yellow in the middle of summer?

A huge tree stands there — and suddenly, for no apparent reason, it falls.. Why did it fall? How can you explain that death is preceded by agony? Life does not surrender without a struggle. It fights death, even though death is the stronger of the two. In the end, life yields to death, only to rise again upon its shoulders. But no one is immortal! There was one such figure in Greek mythology, a man called Sisyphus, who managed to live two lives and even cheated death itself. And how did it end? For deceiving death, Sisyphus was punished by the Olympian gods:

they condemned him to endless, pointless labor, rolling a huge stone up a mountain. How right the ancients were! Do we not, too, labor for the sake of the pointless? We certainly do.

Movement is death's chief adversary. Life surrenders when movement ceases. It is no accident that people rarely say "corpse," but often speak of "the deceased. Life moves; it struggles against death. That struggle is agony. But the agonal period does not last the same length of time in every case. When life and death are still evenly matched, we cannot tell which will win. We call this state a crisis. In novels, you often read of doctors gathered at a patient's bedside while the relatives wait in the next room, hoping to hear what the servants of Aesculapius will say. At last the doctor comes out, wearing a grave expression, and announces: "The crisis has arrived!" Everyone falls silent. They know there are only two possible outcomes. If death wins, there are groans, tears and lamentations. If life prevails, a sigh of relief escapes every breast, and someone says: "Thank God, now he'll begin to recover! Our sick man's a fighter — he's beaten the illness!"

And what if the agonal period is brief? Disaster arrives; the bony hand of death grips a person by the throat. An ambulance is called, but it arrives too late, even though it set out as soon as the call came in. People then say that the person died suddenly. If the agonal period is so short that it cannot even be observed, we speak of sudden death. And that is when a host of questions arise: from what, how, why? No attending physician can establish the cause of sudden death with certainty; at best, the doctor can make an educated guess. The doctor had not observed the course of the illness and may not even have seen the patient. What, then, can the doctor say? The cause can be determined only by examining the dead body; there is no avoiding an autopsy. When a forensic examiner begins one, almost anything may await him: death from a cardiac cause, a hemorrhage in the brain. Cardiac death itself has many possible causes, from an embolism to an acute stress reaction. Have you never heard of a football fan dying suddenly after seeing the opposing team score the decisive goal against his beloved side? Or of a mother dying on receiving a telegram from a son she had long believed dead? Or of a person being struck down by paralysing fear…?

It is a pitch-black night, black as soot. The village has gone to sleep with the first cockcrow and now lies in a deep, dreamless slumber. Somewhere, for no reason anyone can see, a dog barks. The young are still awake; in summer they never seem to sleep at night. They wander about. Couples shelter beneath the trees, whispering and kissing. Elsewhere, a group of teenagers are up to mischief. They have found a skull in the woods, pasted red paper over its eye sockets and put a burning candle inside. Then they tap at old Baba Serafima's window. Half asleep, she cannot make sense of what is happening and rushes to the window… The young rascals thrust the skull towards her and howl together at the top of their lungs. The old woman collapses lifelessly to the floor, and the teenagers run off laughing! Now try to determine the cause of death. The dead woman cannot tell you; the pranksters will not confess. The forensic examiner did not witness what happened. At autopsy, all he can see are age-related changes. What is he to do?

A stroke or acute coronary insufficiency may be suspected when the deceased is elderly, or when relatives can say something about the illnesses the person suffered during life. Sometimes special methods of examination are required, above all microscopy: tiny samples of the deceased's organs are studied under a microscope. What the naked eye cannot see may become visible under magnification.

Sudden death may have a physical cause while masquerading as non-violent. There may even be attempts to deceive the examiner when someone dies at a workplace where safety rules have been

grossly violated. I once received the body of an electrician from the Kerch Iron Ore Combine. I found electrical marks on the fingers of his right hand, but the management tried to convince me that the equipment's voltage was too low to kill anyone. I had to remind them that it was not voltage alone that mattered, but current. One should not assume that a forensic examiner is ignorant of elementary electrical engineering.

Or take Stepan Gavrish, sitting on the bank of a pond with his fishing rods. A little way off, several others like him are doing the same — "quietly obsessed" men who see none of nature's beauty. All their attention is focused on the floats. Stepan's luck is in: he catches a large roach and takes it off the hook. Then another rod jerks, its float bouncing wildly. Gavrish grabs the fish, puts it in his mouth and clamps its head between his teeth, while reaching for the rod that is being pulled away and trying to haul it back. The rod will not budge; it bends sharply, so the fish on the other end must be a big one. His excitement leaves him breathless. He gasps, and the roach slips into his mouth, blocking his airway. The fisherman turns blue and collapses to the ground. His companions rush over, unable to understand what has happened. Only after the autopsy can I conclude that Gavrish died of mechanical asphyxia caused by a fish obstructing his airway.

Here is another example. A man named Amelin is sitting at a table in the Sosna restaurant in the town of Livny. On the table are a decanter of vodka, two sandwiches with chum salmon roe, and noodles with roast chicken. The diner downs a glass of vodka and bites off a piece of chicken. He suddenly turns blue, clutches his throat with both hands, his eyes bulge, and he collapses to the floor. People in the restaurant shout: "Call an ambulance! The man's been poisoned!" The ambulance crew arrives, pronounces him dead, and leaves. At autopsy I find a piece of chicken breast lodged in the lumen of his larynx. Mechanical asphyxia again…

A murder committed with a powerful poison can also be disguised as sudden death. Fortunately, during my years of work I encountered cases of chronic poisoning, poisoning by henbane and by carbon monoxide, but I never saw a case involving strychnine, brucine or cyanides. I do not count poisoning by medications, especially sleeping pills, among these cases.

Death that comes unexpectedly but not instantaneously is far more common than truly sudden death. The dying process often unfolds before witnesses. There is usually enough time to witness it, but not enough to provide qualified medical assistance. Even so, this kind of death holds many mysteries for the layperson, because its arrival takes the dying person by surprise as well.

To understand rapid death, two conditions must be borne in mind. First, the pathological changes may be slight in themselves, too slight to produce clinical symptoms, yet they accumulate. The causes of illness build up slowly, gradually, and the body adapts to them. That is why the patient makes no complaints and considers himself healthy. But a moment comes when even a small additional strain pushes the symptoms over the edge. They suddenly break over the person like a huge wave of illness. Overwhelmed by pain and fear, the person goes into shock; the burden becomes unbearable, and life leaves the body. The ancient Greeks had it easier: they did not dwell on the questions that trouble us so often. They did not believe that life was utterly extinguished, that there was nothingness. Their world was divided into the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. Between them flowed the great river-ocean. To reach the land of the dead, one had to cross or fly over that ocean. Gods and mortals lived in the world of the living. In the world of the dead were shades, the deities of Hades, underworld demons and the children of Night: the Erinyes, dreams and calamities. The soul departed, became a shade in the land of the dead — and that was that!

Yet we search for the cause of a person's departure even when everything was known and all that remained was to wait for death, without knowing when it would arrive. The pathological changes are there; the patient knows about them, and so do those around him. Still, he can live with them as long as the strain remains modest. But if the load increases suddenly, the diseased organs cannot cope, and the person dies.

Our limited knowledge of the elementary laws of biology makes us doubt and question.

And once again, the matter cannot be resolved without the involvement of a forensic medical examiner or a pathologist.

The duties of forensic examiners and pathologists have become so intertwined that, in my view, the time has come to unite them in a single service.

A Shadow of Doubt

A person of generous spirit lives by noble thoughts and meaningful deeds, and blames only himself for his mistakes. Quite different is a person with a small, shallow soul. Content with whatever gifts life has offered, he follows a crooked path, pushing everyone else aside as he goes. When he reaches a dead end, he looks for another way — but it must be crooked, for he cannot face a straight road. He searches for someone to blame for his misfortune; vengeance courses through him. He chokes on his anger until anger is all that remains.

Two criminal cases, separated by many years and driven by different motives, proved to be linked. At first the connection was invisible, almost impossible to notice. Had it not been found, a miscarriage of justice might have occurred and a wholly innocent man might have suffered. Meanwhile, the criminal would have rubbed his hands with satisfaction: revenge accomplished!

The first trial, held in a small town we shall call Town N, as is customary in such stories, attracted little public attention. Yet the defendant was Mikhail Georgievich Kozlodoyev, the well-known head of the local Zarya cooperative: a young man, good-looking and promising in every respect. He was charged with large-scale embezzlement of material assets and selling them for cash — money so necessary at a young age. Though, of course, it is not only the young who need money.

Kozlodoyev was forceful by nature, as more than one woman had discovered, and exceptionally inventive in his commercial dealings. Complaints about the shady side of his activities had often reached higher authorities. Yet commissions made up of respectable representatives of the inspecting bodies had never found anything criminal in the head of Zarya's conduct — until…

Until an experienced auditor from the Control and Audit Department, Pyotr Filippovich Fyodorov, took charge of the inspection. Fyodorov was a sober, deliberate man, slow in his movements and painstaking in his work. He also had a large family, which included his wife's twenty-year-old sister, Klavdia Ivanovna — Klava for short. Not long ago she had been a lanky, long-legged child, forever playing hopscotch and disinclined to study. Without anyone quite noticing how it happened, she had grown into an unattractive, awkward young woman with no particular talents and little capacity for thought — even when it came to the instinct for self-preservation.

When Fyodorov arrived at the cooperative's offices, he demanded the accounting ledgers, sat down at the desk assigned to him and said, "You carry on with your work. Don't pay any attention to me. I'll bother you only when I need something."

And, in truth, his presence was barely felt. But the notes in his notebook kept growing, filling up with figures. Check marks and question marks began to appear beside them. Kozlodoyev came to feel the auditor's presence not merely with his eyes but with every fibre of his body. Fyodorov did not simply irritate the young manager; he had become hateful to him. An invisible threat seemed to emanate from the auditor's calm, impassive face, and the threat grew with every passing day and hour. Kozlodoyev realized that the trap was about to snap shut. He could wait no longer.

He summoned Fyodorov, glanced into the reception area to make sure it was empty, then firmly closed the door to his office. Gesturing for the auditor to sit down, he asked bluntly, "How much do you want?"

Pyotr Filippovich raised his head and remained silent. His face showed not the slightest reaction.

"I'm asking how much you think you're worth. How much do I have to pay you to make you stop this inspection?"

The auditor shrugged. "Nothing at all. The work is finished and the file will be sent to the prosecutor's office. As for the money you think my work is worth, young man, I don't dabble in bribes. My principle is simple: better to eat a little less and sleep a little sweeter."

"I'm giving you another chance to think carefully before you answer. Five thousand roubles is an excellent valuation of your work. I won't gain anything if you put me in the dock! If you leave out of

your report everything you've dug up about me, your reputation won't suffer. Dozens of commissions have been here before, and none of them found anything!" Kozlodoyev said, gesturing sharply with his right hand while the palm of his left trembled.

Pyotr Filippovich's cheeks reddened, as though someone had slapped him several times. But he replied, "Don't waste your time, Mikhail Georgievich. I'm not for sale. I'm not a judge. Let the investigative and judicial authorities assess your actions.

At home, Pyotr Filippovich sat down at his typewriter to prepare the inspection report. His sister-in-law, Klava, came over and said, "May I speak to you, Pyotr Filippovich?"

Fyodorov looked up in surprise. "What is it, Klavochka? Where did that formal tone come from?"

"Someone has proposed to me," Klava said.

"Well, that's splendid," Pyotr Filippovich interrupted. "He's made you an offer. You're an adult; you can accept or refuse it. I don't see what I have to do with it."

"But without even knowing it, you're standing in my way!" the young woman cried, blushing.

"Please explain how I'm standing in your way," Fyodorov said, growing even more puzzled.

"The man I love — the one who proposed to me — is Mikhail Georgievich. And he told me that his fate, and therefore mine, is in your hands!"

"I'm sorry for you. You've made the wrong choice, and there's nothing I can do to help," Pyotr Filippovich said, frowning. "Besides, you're still young. You may yet meet a good man. Kozlodoyev is far too slippery a character for you."

"So you won't help me?" the young woman snapped, bristling.

"No!" Fyodorov cut her short.

The report on the Zarya cooperative's activities was sent to the prosecutor's office. A criminal case was opened, and when the investigation was complete, it went to court. At the trial, Pyotr Filippovich appeared as an expert witness.

A fine, steady rain was falling. Outside, the leaves rustled monotonously beneath the raindrops, and thin streams of water ran down the windowpanes. The courtroom where Kozlodoyev's case was being heard was small, yet half-empty.

First, the trial had already lasted more than a week, and ten thick volumes of case files lay on the table. The casual spectators had grown tired of listening to matters they did not understand at all.

Second, the bad weather kept away those who had come merely out of curiosity.

Two dim bulbs glowed above the judges' bench. At the back of the courtroom, gray shadows held sway. The proceedings dragged on, dull and lifeless. Still, every witness had been questioned, every piece of evidence examined and substantiated. Pyotr Filippovich read out the findings of the forensic accounting examination. No one had any questions for him, and he sank wearily into his chair.

The public prosecutor and defense counsel made their speeches. Fyodorov barely listened, lost in thought. What had Kozlodoyev needed? He had a decent salary and a secure, respected position in society. All right, he had stolen once, twice — but why couldn't he stop?

Kozlodoyev was given the right to make his final statement. The words barely reached Pyotr Filippovich's consciousness. For some reason, he pictured the man speaking in a padded jacket, black cotton trousers and a cap, though he had no clear idea what prisoners wore in a penal colony. The court retired to consider its verdict. Unwilling to wait, Fyodorov stood up and headed for the exit. As he passed the defendant's bench, he heard a hissed threat: "Never mind! You'll remember me yet, you bastard!"

Several years passed. The Kozlodoyev case had long since been forgotten. Pyotr Filippovich continued with his routine but much-loved work. His children grew up. Klavdia Ivanovna remained a modest, withdrawn woman. A stretch of estrangement had opened between her and Pyotr Filippovich, and neither crossed it.

Their conversations were limited to a few commonplace phrases.

On 15 April, Pyotr Filippovich was returning home tired after a busy day at work. Before entering the flat, he opened the letterbox and took out several newspapers. Among them was a summons to the prosecutor's office. The time of appearance was given as 5 p.m. that same day.

Fyodorov looked at his watch: it was 4.20. He had forty minutes. He entered the flat and heard his wife's voice: "Is that you, Petya?"

"No, it's a thief come to steal my darling wife!" Fyodorov joked.

"We don't receive thieves here, but the table's laid for one such as you! Come in, wash your hands and sit down to eat!" his wife ordered.

"Believe me, Nadyusha, I'd be delighted. But I've got a summons to the prosecutor's office for five o'clock."

"You'll have time," his wife said.

"No, I'll have supper later. What's the point of rushing, stuffing myself, then suffering from heaviness and heartburn? No, thank you. I'll go there and come straight back. I don't think it'll take long."

But Pyotr Filippovich was mistaken. He would not return home that day — or the next. Investigator Yegorov at the prosecutor's office detained him, accusing him of murder.

To understand everything that happened, we must go back twenty-four hours, to this same office and the same investigator.

A young woman, plain in appearance, knocked at the door and entered without waiting for permission.

Standing just inside the threshold, she announced in a trembling voice, "Arrest me. I'm guilty of murder! I killed my child!"

Investigator Yegorov replied calmly, as though he were accustomed to hearing such declarations. "Come in, sit down, and tell me what happened. Take your time and give me the full story, without leaving anything out. Perhaps you'd like some water first?"

"No, no. I'm all right…"

Here is what she told him:

My sister Nadya and I were brought up by our mother; we had no father. I was much younger than my sister, born shortly before our father died. Later, my sister married a man named Fyodorov, while I continued living with our mother. Then, quite unexpectedly, Mother died suddenly, and I moved in with my sister and her husband. Last year my sister fell ill and was treated at the local hospital, but nothing helped. We watched her waste away before our eyes. After discussing it as a family, we decided to send her south, so that she might at least spend her final days outdoors, surrounded by nature. She left. Life at home continued much as it had when she was there. Then Pyotr, my sister's husband, and I grew closer, and eventually we began sleeping together.

Before long, we were living as husband and wife, having given up hope that my sister would recover. Then, to our surprise, I became pregnant. I told Pyotr, but he said we should wait: a missed period did not necessarily mean pregnancy. I let myself be reassured, probably foolishly. The pregnancy progressed, and I went to a midwife I knew. She examined me and said it was already too late to have an abortion. To avoid attracting attention, I bound my abdomen tightly and began wearing loose dresses and skirts. Gradually I grew accustomed to my condition, almost forgetting about my dying sister. Then, out of the blue, a letter arrived from the south. My sister wrote that she had recovered and would be home in a few days. I nearly fainted with fear. I began having pains in my abdomen. Pyotr was not at home. What was I to do? I telephoned the midwife.

She arrived in time to deliver the baby. After making sure that both the child and I were all right, she left. Pyotr came home that evening and went into the bedroom, where he saw me with the baby. I told him about the letter. He took it, sat down in an armchair, read it, and then sat motionless for a long time, lost in thought. At last he lit the stove. When the coals were glowing brightly, he

snatched the baby from me and threw her into the fire. I heard the child give a piercing cry and lost consciousness. When I came round, it was all over. I had lost my baby, my precious little girl.

As she spoke, the woman repeatedly pressed a handkerchief to her eyes. The investigator could see tears running down her cheeks. He asked, “Why are you accusing yourself of killing the child when someone else did it?”

She answered, “But I didn’t protect her. And then I kept silent for so long, unable to bring myself to come to you.”

Fyodorov was summoned to the prosecutor’s office on suspicion of infanticide. He answered the investigator’s questions calmly; there was no sign of agitation in his voice, nor the slightest hint of remorse.

“What is your relationship with Klavdia Ivanovna Seleznyova?” the prosecutor’s investigator asked.

“A normal family relationship,” Pyotr Filippovich replied.

“If your relationship is normal, how do you explain her accusing you of such a grave crime as infanticide?” Yegorov asked.

“I can offer no explanation. I don’t know what prompted her to slander me,” Fyodorov said with a shrug.

“Do you plead guilty or not guilty?” the investigator asked bluntly.

“What on earth are you talking about!” Pyotr Filippovich exclaimed. “I’ve never even slaughtered a chicken in my life, let alone killed a child. I don’t even understand where this story came from. It’s sheer madness!”

The investigator called the guards and ordered Fyodorov to be taken into the remand prison.

The next day, the midwife was questioned. She explained:

“Yes, towards the end of July — I can’t remember the exact date — Seleznyova urgently summoned me by telephone.

I suspected why she had called, since I already knew she was pregnant; she had consulted me before. When I arrived, I found her writhing in pain. Her waters had broken, and the baby’s head was crowning. After a few pushes, I was holding a newborn girl in my hands. Her physical development showed that she had been carried to term, and there were no signs of abnormalities. The mother begged me repeatedly not to tell anyone about the birth. Before leaving, I advised her how to conduct herself and care for the baby. I recommended that she call a paediatrician.

“What did you do afterwards?” the investigator asked, looking up from the deposition form.

“To be honest, I didn’t follow up. I have a lot of work; then there are the shops to run to, and when you get home from work you have to cook, clean, and do the washing. I wouldn’t even have remembered the incident if you hadn’t summoned me here!” the midwife replied. Then she asked, “Am I going to be arrested?”

“No one is going to arrest you,” Yegorov remarked, “but you committed quite a few violations. I expect you know that yourself.”

The deposition was concluded and signed by the midwife, who then left.

The investigator did not deliberate for long. Everything seemed clear to him, and with an easy conscience he set about drafting the indictment. Once the case file was ready, he took it to the prosecutor, and that same day it was sent to the people’s court. The accused declined the services of a lawyer, but the court, observing procedural requirements, appointed one from the local bar.

Autumn was drawing to a close. Yellow and crimson leaves adorned the trees, and many lay scattered across the pavements. Passers-by kicked them into the air as they walked. It was a warm, clear day. Wisps of gossamer floated through the air, and clouds of tiny midges swarmed in columns. Since morning, onlookers had been gathering outside the courthouse. It was not every day that someone was tried for murder in a small town. And this was no ordinary killing, committed in the heat of a domestic quarrel: it was infanticide, carried out in a particularly cruel manner.

The trial began with the announcement of the court's composition, followed by the reading of the indictment. It was relatively brief; there were few witnesses, and most could offer nothing of substance about the charge. From the benches came whispers and barely audible gasps of shock.

The accused was called to give evidence. He stubbornly maintained that he was not guilty and knew nothing about the alleged crime. He had committed no offense. He categorically refused to answer the prosecutor's, the defense lawyer's, and the court's questions. His behavior irritated those present and turned them against him. Comments could be heard from the gallery, only to be cut short by the judge: "They ought to throw him into the stove alive!"

His demeanour did not change when the complainant and witnesses were questioned. His only answers were: "No! I don't know! No!"

In his closing speech, the prosecutor touched briefly on the facts but concentrated above all on the accused's character, stressing the enormity of his deed and his refusal to show even the slightest remorse. The speech had been carefully prepared and struck the audience to the heart, stirring up hatred for the defendant. Everyone waited for the defense to speak, wondering what the lawyer might say to lessen his client's punishment.

Yet the lawyer's speech surprised everyone. He began:

"It's difficult for me to defend a man who has shown no remorse for his crime. Every fact points to him, and every one has been confirmed in court." He spread his hands helplessly.

The judge interrupted him. "There is more than enough evidence against him! Give the court at least one reason why, in your opinion, his guilt should be mitigated."

"I have no such argument!" the lawyer exclaimed, blushing. "Everything is as clear as daylight. My client is guilty! The only shadow of doubt I have is this: why was no forensic medical examination carried out?"

The prosecutor interjected, "There's no body. What is there to examine?"

"The complainant," the lawyer replied.

"And what would that prove, given how much time has passed since the alleged birth?"

"Let us at least observe the formalities," the lawyer said weakly.

After a brief consultation, the court ruled: "A forensic medical examination of the complainant, Seleznyova, is to be carried out." The hearing was adjourned until the following day.

The next day, a young, dark-haired forensic medical examiner was called to court. His findings shocked everyone. The report stated that Seleznyova had not merely never given birth — she had never had sexual intercourse.

She was a virgin.

The reason for the false accusation was established there and then in court. When Kozlodoyev realized that his attempt to bribe Fyodorov had failed, he decided to exert pressure through Fyodorov's sister-in-law, Klavdia Seleznyova.

This was not difficult. There was nothing particularly attractive about the young woman: neither an appearance that caught the eye, nor any depth of character, nor the ability to present herself well.

In truth, she was an outcast. Her natural feelings, artificially suppressed, were desperate for an outlet. Then Kozlodoyev appeared. It took little effort for him to make a girl who knew love only from novels fall in love with him. She was utterly besotted. But his attempt to influence Fyodorov by offering Klavdia the prospect of marriage came to nothing. Kozlodoyev looked for the cause of his failure everywhere except in himself.

He found a lightning rod for his frustration: Fyodorov. And indeed, at any stage of his work, Fyodorov could have halted the investigation without recording anything substantial, limiting himself to minor irregularities. He risked nothing by doing so. He had the opportunity, but did not take it. He could have saved a man, but instead drowned him. Kozlodoyev's soul was filled with hatred. With plenty of time on his hands, he devised a plan of revenge. In his letters to his "beloved", he wrote not

only of love and of their plans to start a family after his release, but also nurtured Klavdia's hatred of her sister's husband, presenting him as the sole obstacle to her happiness.

The midwife's conduct still had to be assessed. Without her testimony, the entire scheme would have collapsed like a house of cards. She did not resist for long before admitting that her friend Seleznyova had persuaded her to give the false evidence. Even after she saw the monstrous consequences of her testimony, however, she did not retract it, afraid of being punished. The investigators still had to determine the legal consequences of the actions of the "complainant" and the "witness".

All in all, Kozlodoyev's plan would have succeeded had no shadow of doubt arisen.

Revenge

Those who have rights and possess power do not resort to revenge. It is the recourse of those who cannot answer an offender directly. Revenge takes a long time to be born; its birth is no easier than that of a living creature. The offender must feel it, suffer, and be made to writhe. At the same time, the avenger must avoid exposing himself to retaliation. The best course is to use an outsider as the instrument of revenge while remaining in the shadows. If inanimate objects are to be used, the deed must be made to look like an accident. Different possibilities are considered. The more options there are, the greater the choice and the easier it becomes to carry out the plan. The number of people involved should be kept small, because every additional person increases the risk of discovery. Finally, the person carrying out the revenge must believe that he is acting on his own initiative, rather than serving as a blind instrument. The nature of revenge depends entirely on the intelligence of the avenger.

It takes little ingenuity to dig a pit for a neighbor to fall into at night and break his leg, or to set a tripwire connected to an explosive device. But devising something more elaborate requires thought.

In the work of a forensic medical examiner, anything can happen — including revenge. Even when it is laughably simple, proving it can demand serious effort.

Let me give a few examples from my own practice.

Two neighbors, Kurentsov and Nakichenovich, had lived side by side for years in peace. They had little to quarrel over: a sandy seashore a few dozen meters away, poor soil for their kitchen gardens, and the summer sky blazing overhead. When they had free time, the men would meet, smoke their cigarettes, and talk politics and everyday matters. On holidays they might have a drink together. That was about it; they spent the day at work. Their wives sometimes fell out over the children, sulking at one another for a while, until they noticed the children playing happily together again. The women would make up, smile, and visit each other to chat about domestic affairs.

Then one day Nakichenovich brought home a roll of wire mesh, cut it in half, and began fencing off his vegetable patch. He said the neighbor's goat was forever wandering through his garden — even though the place was mostly overgrown with weeds. Kurentsov snorted with displeasure but said nothing. Then one day Nakichenovich's hen flew over the fence into Kurentsov's yard. Kurentsov picked up a stick and struck it. The hen clucked and hopped about on one leg. The men came to blows, and their wives grabbed each other by the hair. Their shouting could be heard all over Eltigen! Nakichenovich proved stronger and heavier, leaving his neighbor with a black eye and a small abrasion on his forehead. How could Kurentsov leave such an insult unavenged? He simply could not. He came to me for an examination — to have his injuries recorded, as people put it. Naturally, several days had already passed since the fight. I recorded the injury in my report, classified it, and told him, "Take the matter to the people's court and bring a private prosecution."

"To court?" Kurentsov protested. "I want Nakichenovich put in prison!"

"I'm neither a prosecutor nor a judge. I have no authority to send anyone to prison. You'll have to make a complaint."

Kurentsov left, and I forgot about him. But he soon reminded me of himself. He returned with a referral from the prosecutor and an extract from his medical record, which gave the diagnosis as erysipelas of the face. There were questions: was the erysipelas connected with the injury, and what degree of severity should be assigned to the bodily harm?

I had to state that, given the two-week interval between the abrasion and the onset of erysipelas, the connection had to be ruled out. The injuries themselves were minor and had caused no health impairment. I naturally suspected how Kurentsov had brought on the erysipelas, but I did not even mention it. Do not create trouble for yourself — that is a sound principle in professional life.

Another fortnight passed, and the prosecutor of Kerch, I. G. Shinin, and I were summoned to the city party committee, to the third secretary, Yerokhin. The conversation that followed deserves to be recounted briefly. First, we had to wait a long time in the reception room before being called in. I had the impression that the secretary wanted us to stew a little and appreciate the importance of the forthcoming conversation. At last his secretary — a pleasant young woman with a serious expression — invited us inside. Yerokhin remained seated behind his desk and silently gestured for us to sit. His expression was indignantly calm. I kept my face impassive and felt no anxiety. I had good reason: I was not a party member and was subordinate to no one in the city. Ivan Grigoryevich was in a different position; a certain unease could be read on his face. After a long pause, the third secretary addressed the prosecutor in a menacing tone:

"Why should I have to deal with your affairs? Why hasn't Nakichenovich been arrested?"

"What should he be arrested for?" the prosecutor asked, trying to remain calm.

"What do you mean, what for?" Yerokhin's indignation was genuine. "Citizen Kurentsov was beaten for no reason, spent nearly a month in hospital, and is still on sick leave — and you ask me what for?"

"I cannot authorise an arrest when the forensic medical examiner's report classifies the injuries as minor," the prosecutor said, turning slightly pale.

Only then did the secretary appear to notice me. He turned his head and asked, "And what do you have to say?"

"When I issue an expert opinion, I am guided not by my own wishes but by the requirements of the law," I replied.

At that point Yerokhin made an inexcusable mistake. He blurted out, "What do I care about the law?"

I stood up and said, addressing the prosecutor more than the city party secretary, "I'm leaving. There is nothing for me to do here if the law is not respected!"

Yerokhin hastened to backtrack. "You've misunderstood me, comrades!"

But I was already closing the door behind me. A few minutes later Ivan Grigoryevich came out and said conciliatorily, "Why did you have to be so abrupt, Pyotr Petrovich?"

"Ivan Grigoryevich, Yerokhin is nobody to me! I'm not a party member. What can he do to spite me — dismiss me, demote me? My superiors are in Simferopol. And why should I listen to a tactless, foolish secretary pontificating on matters he plainly has no business judging?"

Afterwards I walked alone, thinking: where is society heading if an incompetent man presumes to lecture a prosecutor, whose duty is to ensure that the law is properly enforced?

Revenge aimed at one person can change direction and strike the innocent — though in such a case even the word "punishment" is blasphemous. One summer, a leading bass from the Mariinsky Theatre — or perhaps the Kirov Opera and Ballet Theatre; after so many years I have forgotten his surname — came to Kerch for a holiday. He was young, handsome, and healthy, with all his glory still ahead of him. What could one do? Performers serving Melpomene and Terpsichore were paid so poorly that they had to holiday as "independent travelers", finding their own accommodation. This singer rented a small summer house in Stary Karantin, on the outskirts of Kerch. How could he have known that the owner's neighbor, intent on revenge, had tampered with the electrical wiring? On the second day of his stay, the singer decided to boil water for tea. He put a plug into the socket and fell dead to the floor.

When I examined the body, I concluded that death had been caused by electric shock. The body was to be taken to Leningrad for burial. I remember the exclamation of the man who had come from Leningrad to arrange its transport: "Oh, God! What a voice! An irreparable loss! A voice like that is born only once in a century!" As I filled out the medical death certificate, I put down my pen and imagined the stage: the singer playing Mephistopheles in Gounod's Faust, wearing a glossy black

cloak on a fiery-red set as he sang his serenade. The prosecutor's office handled the case. All that remained for me was to reflect on how petty and malicious a human being can be.

Revenge can take unpredictable forms when a person devotes exceptional abilities to it. If only those abilities were put to good use…

A Quiet Little House

An elderly married couple were living out their final years in house number 5 on Kalinin Street in Kerch. What more could old people ask for? Warmth, a dry roof, a little food, and a great deal of peace. The house looked decent, both inside and out. There was a small vegetable garden, several peach trees, two apricot trees, and three grapevines twining over the arbour by the entrance. Their life might have been called comfortable, if only old Fyodor could move. For the past year he had been paralysed. His entire left side was useless, though eventually a few slight movements returned to the fingers of his hand — and that was all. At first he lost his speech, too; later it returned as something like the croaking of cranes: "Ku-ku-rrl! Pa-ki-ri-li!" Only Baba Vera understood her husband's speech — or at least that was how it appeared to an outsider. After a year spent lying helplessly in bed, the old man had grown a beard that would have made even the biblical Methuselah envious.

Their pensions were enough for the two of them. Food was cheap, and fashionable clothes were unnecessary. But Baba Vera was not satisfied. She continued saving for her old age, failing to notice that old age had arrived long ago. At first she took in lodgers. In summer, the yard filled with strangers, drawn by the house's proximity to the sea. Then she realized that holidaymakers brought too much trouble: they had to be watched every moment. So she began taking in young couples, making agreements to leave them the house as an inheritance in return for looking after the old people. Many came, tempted by the promise of inheriting the property, but for some reason the agreements were always terminated after six or seven months. The owner was invariably the one to end them, although, to be fair, the "heirs" had not been stingy in caring for the elderly couple.

Even the neighbors began to suspect Baba Vera of dishonesty, calling her a miser behind her back. Experience should have warned her how dangerous a path she had chosen. But greed blinds the eyes; they cannot see very far. The benefits obtained by deception cloud one's vision and dazzle the eyes. And there was no one to advise her: old age does not welcome advice from the young, considering itself far too wise. Acquaintances would tell Baba Vera, "Oh, just you wait — you'll run into someone one day, and you'll regret it for a long time!" Trouble was always lurking nearby.

Once again, a young couple moved into the little house on Kalinin Street. He was a local man of indeterminate age and appearance, stocky, muscular, and hardworking, with the surname Khroni. She was a young, attractive woman with olive skin, rather like a Greek woman; even her surname, Khelisidi, sounded unusual. No, she was not Khroni's wife; she was his common-law partner. They had lived together for more than four years, but they could not marry because Khroni had not divorced his previous wife. Their lack of a secure family home made life no easier. One might have thought this couple would last: they had lived there for eleven months without any friction with the old people. Then one morning Baba Vera told her "heirs" that she was terminating their agreement and that they must urgently find another flat. She made no complaint against the young couple. Four days later, the police received a report that the landlady's dead body was lying in the veranda of house number 5 on Kalinin Street. The report came from the lodger.

The veranda was crammed with things useful around the house at different times of the year. More than anything, it reminded me of a summer kitchen: shelves and more shelves, holding empty jars and jars of vegetables, various spices, handbags, bags and little packets. There was a kitchen table, two stools, a gas cylinder, and a small portable gas burner. Beside the table lay the old woman's body, face up. She wore a brown flannelette dress, a cardigan and a quilted cotton jacket over it, felt boots with galoshes, and a down scarf on her head. On external examination there were no injuries to her clothing or body, apart from a few small abrasions on the back of her right hand. The body was already cold, and the post-mortem changes suggested that death had occurred at least ten hours earlier.

We questioned the lodger, Khelisidi. She said her partner had not been at home; he had gone to visit a friend in Adzhimushkai the previous evening. She had gone to bed early, not expecting him

back, and had not woken during the night. When she went out into the yard to relieve herself, she discovered the landlady's body. We found the old man asleep; there was no point trying to speak to him. On the evidence gathered at the scene, we concluded that the death was most likely non-violent.

However, my post-mortem examination showed that we had all been wrong. The deceased had multiple antemortem rib fractures. A bone fragment had pierced the lower lobe of the right lung, and the pleural cavity contained about half a liter of liquid blood and blood clots. Given the fragility of bones in old age, such injuries could have been caused by forceful pressure from a blunt object — for example, a knee pressed down on the body.

After consulting Alexander Vasilyevich Yevstifeyev, a senior investigator at the prosecutor's office, we decided to lull the killer into a false sense of security. We had no doubt that Khroni was the murderer, nor that he had an excellent alibi ready for the occasion. To this end, I handed him a death certificate stating that citizen Sarycheva had died of cardiovascular failure caused by chronic atherosclerotic cardiosclerosis. We hoped the killer would relax, let down his guard, and make a mistake — a thread we could pull to unravel the whole tangle.

Our plan was thwarted by the police, whose overzealous and damaging actions were taken without informing the prosecutor's investigator. They detained Khroni. Under Article 100 of the Ukrainian SSR Code of Criminal Procedure, the police were entitled to detain anyone suspected of a crime for three days. Within that period, evidence sufficient to support an indictment had to be assembled. In this case, that was impossible. Khroni remained in the prison remand center on a separate charge of evading alimony payments for the child from his first marriage. The case, still raw and lacking a sufficient evidentiary basis, was sent to court. It was hardly surprising that the murderer was acquitted.

A year later, I met Khroni's partner again. She had come to be examined after he had beaten her. I called her aside for an honest conversation, and she told me in detail how Khroni had killed the old woman. It had been simple: he knocked her to the floor, pressed his knee against her chest, and after struggling for a moment she fell still. I offered to have her testify, but she firmly refused. House number 5 on Kalinin Street went to a new lodger, a woman with a young daughter, who became the old man's guardian.

Well, what can you do? Mistakes happen in our work…

Forever in the Ranks

"If only you knew where you were going to fall, you'd lay down some straw!" Then you wouldn't go peering into the underworld, wouldn't lean over its bottomless abyss. An encounter with stupidity, with madness, is terrifying. It breathes the black chill of death right into your face. Yet your body feels none of it, basking in the golden rays of the sun. The seal of death is already upon you. You are dead, though you are still alive.

You act out of compassion, once again trying to save a woman — this time at the cost of your life — with whom you have spoken so often, whom you have so persistently urged to divorce her husband. She listened, nodding in agreement, sobbing and shedding tears. Oh, how naive a woman can be, believing she can salvage the wreckage of a marriage that was never particularly happy to begin with. She keeps defending the man, considering him the father of her children, although he abandoned that responsibility long ago. And now he is about to destroy yet another family that has done nothing to deserve it.

The district was much like any other. A village was a village. There were no major crimes, just petty offenses. Someone got into a fight. Someone disrupted an evening at the collective-farm club with hooligan antics. Someone stole something. Theft was a constant problem. Things disappeared from the fields and from the vineyards. And we could not forget those who made illicit moonshine. That, too, was against the rules!

There were more complicated cases as well. Once, for example, the body of an infant was found in an animal burial pit. The little body was fresh, with no signs of decomposition. Who had gone looking in such a place, and why? The forensic medical examiner was called in. He examined the infant and concluded that the child had been born alive and could have survived if only the umbilical cord had been tied.

For the expert, the matter was straightforward: he examined the body and issued his conclusion. But the local police officer, Hutsuliark, had to find the person responsible. Someone had known where the animal burial pit was. Who? Only the locals knew about it.

Two weeks passed before Hutsuliark established that there had been no women in the village at an advanced stage of pregnancy. But the Lukins had received a visitor — a woman from the Kuban region. She had not stayed long, only two days, and then headed for the ferry. The timing matched the infant's death.

An alert was sent to the Kuban, and the attractive "mother" was found. The reason she had come to Crimea to give birth soon became clear. It turned out that the criminal codes differed. In the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, there was no separate article for infanticide; the act fell under the general charge of murder, including the murder of a newborn, punishable by up to ten years in prison. In Ukraine, however, infanticide was a distinct offense, carrying a much lighter sentence — up to three years' imprisonment.

Well, people had become remarkably resourceful. They even knew the finer points of criminal law.

That day had been relatively peaceful. What could disturb the quiet in June? A thunderstorm with rain and hail? A fire in the fields? Nothing of the sort had happened. Hutsuliark had visited the fields, the collective farm's vegetable garden, and the workshops. Everything was in order. His conscience was at ease, though his legs were not: they were tired, and his ankles ached.

His wife called him to the table. Hutsuliark ate alone; everyone else had finished lunch long ago. He was not a fussy man. He ate a deep bowl of borscht and six cottage-cheese dumplings, then rose from the table, patting his stomach. After a meal, a man might reasonably hope for an hour or two of sleep.

But he was not allowed that luxury.

A lad arrived on a bicycle with news: a drunken man named Fedorchuk was threatening people with a shotgun. Fedorchuk got drunk often, and when he did, he chased his wife and children around the village. The drunken bully could have been dealt with long ago, but his wife, Nastya, kept pleading for him. If he were sent to prison, she would be left with the children. How would she feed them? What would they live on?

The district officer sighed, wheeled out his old bicycle, and pressed hard on the pedals.

The first thing he saw was Fedorchuk standing with a hunting rifle, aiming at his wife. They were no more than ten meters apart.

"Drop the gun!" the policeman shouted as he jumped off his bicycle.

He had just managed to put his own body between the woman and the gunman when two shots rang out, one from each barrel.

Blood poured from Hutsuliark's chest. He managed to wrest the gun away from Fedorchuk. And then…

Then the policeman fell to the ground and died.

I performed the autopsy on the district officer's body. He was still young, a strong man, and as I worked, I kept thinking:

What protection does a policeman's life have? What benefits does he receive in return for risking it? What will happen to his wife and children? What obligations does the state have toward them?

In America, a police officer who sees an armed man is entitled to shoot to kill without warning. Our officer must first issue a warning, then fire a warning shot into the air. After that, a court may decide whether he exceeded the permissible limits of self-defense!

The family of an American police officer will be financially provided for. A police officer's life is valued at up to a million dollars. Hutsuliark's wife, by contrast, will have to work herself to the bone to raise the children.

Honor and glory to you, dear Hutsuliark. Your name will be entered forever on the rolls of your own police force. You will remain in its ranks with honor. For a while, people will even remember you!

Jealousy Knows No Reason

November 9. The holidays had just ended, and the festive mood had not yet worn off. The last thing I wanted was to get back to work.

Fortunately, I was not assigned to the autopsy room that day, so I was free of post-mortem examinations. I had some unfinished expert reports to complete and think through, and I was also on call for visits to crime scenes.

At 9:30 a.m., a message came in: a body had been discovered at No. 16 Galaktionovskaya Street. I was asked to come to the scene.

The regional forensic medical examination building was not far away. I was young — twenty-four — and reached the address on foot fairly quickly.

An old two-story red-brick building stood facing the street. There were openings for gates on either side, but the gates themselves were missing. Behind the building stretched a long, narrow courtyard, about fifty meters deep. Single-story outbuildings lined the right-hand side; a high fence ran along the left.

At the very back stood a solitary square wooden house, plastered on the outside. The plaster had fallen away in places, revealing old, gray logs covered with wooden laths. Over the years, the house had sunk so deeply into the ground that its threshold was level with the earth. To enter the narrow, dim corridor, one had to descend three wooden steps.

The landlord had divided the interior into tiny cubicles with thin plank partitions, squeezing as many coins as possible out of his tenants. The living conditions were worse than in any dormitory. There was no kitchen, the toilet was outside, and there was nowhere to wash clothes or bathe the children. What could people do? Housing in the city center was expensive, and not everyone could afford it.

A group of people stood by the entrance: police officers, military personnel, and civilians. I recognized one of them, Lieutenant Colonel Kostochka, head of the Thirteenth Police Station in Kuibyshev. He was a stocky, heavyset man with a noticeable belly. The district prosecutor and investigator were there, along with a military prosecutor and an investigator from the Volga Military District.

I was asked to go farther into the building. I entered a poorly lit corridor and walked about four meters before turning right. I could go no farther: people were packed together in a dense crowd. But it turned out I did not need to go any farther. The scene was just to my right.

The room door stood ajar, and curious onlookers kept peering inside. Senior city prosecutor's investigator Prokhorov met me at the doorway. There was no room for both of us inside. The room was tiny and crammed with furniture — or perhaps the crowding simply made it seem that way. We decided I would enter alone. The investigator sat on a chair by the door, and I began dictating the crime-scene inspection report. The witnesses stood beside him.

I had to step very carefully. Almost the entire floor was covered with congealed blood. I had never seen such a thick pool of blood before.

And so I began my work.

In films and crime stories, the investigator is usually shown as the central figure at a crime scene. Theoretically, in matters of procedure, that is correct. But when a crime scene involves human victims, the forensic medical examiner often has to take the lead. Investigators, after all, are not particularly familiar with the parts of the human body.

I will try to reconstruct what I saw from memory.

The room was rectangular, measuring five by three meters. The window was opposite the door and faced the courtyard. A burgundy silk curtain was drawn tightly across it, so I initially had to rely on the electric light.

Just inside the entrance, on the left, stood a fairly large chest. Its top seemed to serve as a bed; it was covered with a blanket, and two pillows lay against the wall. A woman's blouse, skirt, and stockings were scattered carelessly over the blanket. A wardrobe stood close beside the chest.

By the window was a small dressing table. Women's toiletries lay on it, along with a small oval mirror. Two notes, each written on a quarter-sheet of white paper in uneven handwriting with purple ink, had been placed on top of the mirror.

One read:

"This kind of crime is punishable only by death. Whoever carries out the execution must be guided by conscience."

The note was signed with a flourish of elaborate curls, but the surname could be made out: Zamaraev.

The second note read:

"Tanechka, live and grow up, and don't become like your mother. Kolya, live and grow up, and don't do what your father did."

It bore the same signature as the first.

I read the notes aloud and had them added to the case file. It was already clear that the crime had been committed by a lodger, an officer serving at the headquarters of the Volga Military District. The notes suggested that the murder had been motivated by jealousy.

To the right of the window stood a narrow double bed. Beneath a quilted cotton blanket, soaked with blood in places, the outline of a human body could be seen. At the foot of the bed, on top of the blanket, lay a pair of khaki riding breeches and a military tunic.

Every available stretch of wall was covered with pictures embroidered in Bulgarian cross-stitch, each placed in a narrow frame.

I removed the layers of clothing from the bed one by one, dictating each item to the investigator for the report. At last, I reached the body.

It lay on its back. The dead woman was young and beautifully built. She wore a pink silk nightdress — but her head had been severed.

Judging by the nature of the cut, the head had been removed with an ordinary straight razor. The edges were clean, though marked by numerous small cuts in the skin. There were no other injuries on the body.

A search of the room produced no sign of the missing head. I moved into the corridor and began checking the buckets standing there.

Just then, I heard someone shout from outside:

"Her husband's coming!"

I rushed out and saw the back of a man moving away. He wore riding breeches tucked into boots, a gray cotton jacket over his military tunic, and an ordinary gray peaked cap. He was walking quickly away from the house.

Police officers and prosecutors immediately took off after him.

To this day, I cannot explain what made me join the chase. It was not part of my duties. Perhaps the crowd instinct had taken over subconsciously. I was young and ran regularly, so I quickly overtook everyone else and began closing in on the killer.

Soon, only the two of us were running down the middle of the street, along the tram tracks. Sensing me behind him, he began weaving from side to side. That made it easier to catch up. I grabbed the back of his jacket.

To my astonishment, the jacket came away in my hands, while the man kept running.

I threw it to the ground and resumed the chase. When I was about three meters behind him, a tram began to catch up with us. It was an old model whose doors remained open while it was moving.

The killer grabbed the handrails and disappeared into the tram. I stopped, unwilling to attempt such a feat myself.

I was still standing there, watching the tram recede, when a passenger car pulled up beside me. It was a GAZ-12 ZIM. The door opened, and a voice called:

"Get in!"

I found myself among uniformed police officers.

Lieutenant Colonel Kostochka proposed a plan. We would follow the tram and seize the man as soon as he got off. I was assigned the crucial role because I was dressed in civilian clothes. I was supposed to approach from behind and grab the suspect at Kostochka's signal.

I still cannot understand why I agreed.

As it happened, we had planned one thing and ended up doing something quite different.

At the corner of Galaktionovskaya and Rabochaya Streets, near the house-museum of V. I. Lenin, the tram stopped. A senior lieutenant stepped off. I could not have mistaken him for anyone else: it was cold outside, and he was lightly dressed.

As agreed, I approached him from behind, waiting for the signal.

But then—

Kostochka pointed the car's starting crank at the suspect. It was an incredibly long crank.

"Hands up!" he ordered.

To my amazement, the senior lieutenant raised his hands.

Acting on instinct, I stood behind him, thrust my hands into the pockets of his riding breeches, and pulled out a TT pistol. The safety was off, and the magazine was full.

That was when I became genuinely frightened. What would have stopped him from shooting us all? The punishment would be the same whether he had killed one person or several. I could have been the first to die. I pictured my wife and my tiny daughter waiting for me at home.

I never tried to catch another criminal again. Everyone should stick to the work they are meant to do.

The officer himself was frightened, too. I could hear his kneecaps knocking together.

Later, during an interrogation conducted in my presence, the detained man explained that he had killed his wife because she had been unfaithful to him.

They had attended a gathering for the October holidays. At some point, she had smiled at someone. When they returned home, he started an argument. The children were not there; they had been left with acquaintances before the couple went out.

His wife said nothing. She undressed and went to bed, while he stayed awake, smoking for a long time and working himself into a frenzy with images of his wife's supposed infidelity.

The children of Dark Night hovered around him, whispering in his ears:

"Take revenge! What are you waiting for? Your love has been dishonored! Soon everyone will laugh at you, the cuckold!"

They drove him toward the dressing table. His hands seemed to move on their own, reaching into the drawer and taking out the straight razor.

He seized his wife by her thick mass of black hair. She screamed and tried to break free. Clenching his teeth in fury, he slashed her throat.

Then, still under the spell of monstrous, dark visions, he spent a long time severing her head. He wrapped it in his underpants, put it in a string shopping bag, and carried it to the bank of the Volga. There he threw the head into the water and stood smoking one cigarette after another, lighting each from the last.

The investigator asked him why he had returned home on the day he was arrested.

"I wanted to say goodbye to her, to kiss her!"

"Kiss her where, if you cut off her head?" Kostochka interjected.

"On the chest," the detainee replied.

I had seen more than one murder committed out of jealousy, but this man's behavior was beyond the ordinary. He had not been in a drunken stupor. The notes he had written suggested that his actions had been deliberate. That was inconsistent with severe intoxication.

Nor did this look like pathological intoxication, which is typically followed by prolonged sleep and complete amnesia about what happened.

One question remained: why had he severed the head and carried it to the Volga?

Well, the murderer still had to undergo a forensic psychiatric examination. My task was to perform the autopsy on the headless body, which I did. Two days later, the victim's head was brought to the morgue, and I sewed it back onto the torso.

The woman was twenty-five years old. She had been a beautiful, black-haired woman, with small gold earrings in her neat little ears.

My personal view is that the officer's relentless drinking caused the tragedy. He had begun to show signs of impotence, and sexual relations with a husband who was dead drunk were becoming a burden to his wife. He wanted to shift the blame onto his partner, to explain the fading of their feelings by inventing groundless jealousy.

A woman with two small children, who spent her time making embroidered pictures, hardly had time to run around with other men.

And so the predictable result: the officer failed to use his own head. With a single stroke of a razor, he destroyed the woman he loved, ruined his own life, and made two little children orphans.

In my work, I never learned to remain indifferent toward those who take another person's life. No excuse is acceptable to me — except self-defense.

Joy of Birth

The birth of a child, the birth of a new life. How much has been written about this mystery of life! How many worries, how much trouble go into preparing for a child's arrival. And how much suffering a woman endures while carrying a child. I remember how difficult my wife's pregnancy was. I remember spending the entire night until morning in the railway station dispatcher's office, calling the maternity hospital every half hour. I remember the joy and relief I felt when the midwife told me, "You have a daughter!" And I always felt uneasy whenever I had to perform an autopsy on a newborn.

What could be done? Abortions were prohibited in our country, and having a child was not always something a woman wanted. Contraceptives were primitive and unreliable. For a woman with a child, getting married was always difficult. Under Peter the Great, who was concerned with the population of the state, any woman could give her child to an orphanage openly and freely, without having to sneak around, and the infant would be accepted. Girls were taught handicrafts, while boys were prepared for military service.

I thought about all this as I set off on an assignment to Dubovy Umet, a district center in Kuibyshev Region, now Samara Region. The only connection with the outside world was a bus route along a cobblestone road that, in places, turned into an ordinary dirt track. During the spring thaw, and especially during floods, transport links with this ancient village of a hundred single-story wooden houses were cut off for ten to twelve days. Anyone sent there on assignment at the end of April risked being stranded until the snowmelt subsided, dying of boredom and idleness. I knew all this as I prepared to travel at the request of the local prosecutor's office.

The bus had been through everything imaginable. The long, jolting ride was made worse by an engine that kept sputtering because its carburetor was improperly adjusted. The worn-out, sunken seat dug into every part of my body that touched it. I breathed a sigh of relief when the bus finally reached its destination and I climbed out.

An investigator was waiting for me, a balding, middle-aged man in uniform. There was no morgue in this Godforsaken village. A forensic examination of a body had to be carried out in the deceased person's home. This was not unusual in my professional practice, and everyone had grown accustomed to it.

And so we arrived at the house: a spacious wooden cottage with five rooms, as though it had stepped straight out of the nineteenth century into the 1950s. A passage connecting the living quarters with the livestock shed greeted me with a sharp, unmistakable smell. The main room had two small, dim windows that had not been washed in ages. A large wooden table stood in the middle, covered with a diaper. On the table lay the subject of the examination: the body of a female infant, fifty centimeters long, bearing all the signs of a newborn — but with the umbilical cord still untied.

I saw the mother of the newborn there too: a freckled, broad-boned young woman, unmarried and with no clear prospects of marriage.

My request that the bystanders leave the room — there were quite a few of them — was met with displeasure, but eventually they complied. The prosecutor's investigator and I were left beside the table. I had already read the order appointing the forensic medical examination. The questions put to the expert were routine, standard ones.

I began my examination. Half an hour later, I explained my findings to the investigator: the infant was a full-term newborn, born alive and capable of surviving. The cause of death was mechanical asphyxia — suffocation by drowning.

The investigator looked at me in astonishment.

"This can happen," I explained, "when a woman gives birth while sitting on a bucket of water, or when a newborn is placed in water immediately after birth. In either case, it is a criminal act!"

The investigator immediately asked the mother to explain how she had drowned the child.

"Well, the way people usually drown kittens!" she replied, apparently surprised that a grown man — and a prosecutor's investigator at that — could be so slow to understand.

I saw no agitation, no trembling hands, and heard no broken or faltering speech. She seemed matter-of-fact, almost listless. I understood that, in her eyes, the life of the creature she had carried inside her for nine months and then given birth to was worth very little.

Had she breastfed the baby even once, allowing the child's toothless mouth to press against her nipple, everything might have been different. Her maternal instinct might have awakened. But as things stood…

Before me stood a living woman with a cold, stony soul.

I could not contain myself. Outraged, I said to the mother, "How could you bring yourself to do such a thing?"

She answered calmly, "Am I not allowed to do it? It's my child, after all! We drown kittens, don't we?"

"But this is a child, a human being! How can you compare a baby to a kitten? This is a crime!" The words burst out of me.

She looked surprised, shrugged, and said, "Am I the only one who does it? What about Palashka Snegireva? What about Lidka Kuznetsova? And…"

The list turned out to be quite long. The investigator hurriedly wrote the names in his notebook, while I realized that I would not be getting out of there anytime soon.

The Last Journey

She stepped onto the platform at Kuibyshev railway station. She had returned from a trip only that very day.

Three days of the bustle and commotion of railway life. Although the work was not physically demanding, the journey had worn her out completely. During the day, there was no peace from the passengers. Everyone needed something, and they needed it immediately — right now, this very minute.

One man wanted to shave and demanded that the electricity be switched on. Another wanted tea, even though he had only just boarded and had not yet unpacked his things onto the shelves. Someone had opened a window, and someone else insisted that it be shut because draughts had been tormenting him all his life. Others complained that the compartment was poorly ventilated.

One passenger brusquely demanded that the toilet door be opened, although he knew perfectly well that the toilets were supposed to remain closed during long stops at major railway stations.

Evening came. It seemed that the passengers had finally settled down, but no: some man who had overindulged in strong drink decided to perform several operatic arias, imagining himself the new Caruso.

Then the stations began flashing past. At every stop, she had to open the doors, step down with her signal flag, and see passengers off or welcome them aboard.

And, to make matters worse, her partner had fallen ill, so she had to do everything herself.

But thank God, all the troubles were behind her. Three days off lay ahead.

It was sunny, the first half of September, and a pleasant warmth caressed her body. She could go home to her mother — and, if she was lucky, see Kostya.

She had not seen him for a week and longed for his strong embrace. How he had loved her before! How he had waited for her! He had been ready to give everything for a single moment in her presence. He worshipped her as though she were a goddess. And she had given him her whole body and soul, holding nothing back — not words of love, not caresses.

After standing on the platform for a few minutes, lost in thought, she headed for the dormitory. She changed into fresh clothes and went to the canteen, deciding that it would be a good idea to have something to eat before setting off.

At the far end of the canteen, at a table by the window, sat two of her workmates: Liza Syromyatina from Kryazh and Svetlana Boborykina from Zubchaninovka. One chair was empty.

She walked over, sat down, and asked:

“What have you girls ordered?”

“Vegetable stew and meat patties!” Boborykina answered on behalf of them all.

“Do they have vinaigrette?”

“Vinaigrette again, and soybeans!” Liza Syromyatina laughed. “Tell me, Katya, you’re not pregnant by any chance?”

“Oh, leave me alone!” Katya waved her off, went to the serving counter, and returned with a plate of vinaigrette and some soybeans.

She settled herself comfortably and began eating in a hurry, barely chewing her food.

“Why are you rushing?” Boborykina asked, glancing at the clock. “It’s only twelve.”

“My train leaves in half an hour!”

“Taking a freight train again?” Liza asked.

“Yes. It’s faster, and I don’t have to arrange travel papers,” Katya replied, getting up.

She went to the mirror, took lipstick from her handbag, touched up her lips, and moistened a finger with saliva to smooth down her unruly eyebrows. She sighed and went outside.

Her friends never saw her alive again.

I arrived at the regional forensic medical examination office earlier than everyone else, as usual.

At the entrance, beside the open doors, stood Yegor Stepanovich, a solid, sturdy man of about fifty with an ordinary, snub-nosed Slavic face.

He performed a multitude of jobs at the office and, surprisingly, managed them all extremely well. He was responsible for cleaning the yard and also for lighting the twenty-two stoves that heated the large, single-story forensic examination building at the end of a dead-end stretch of Krasnoarmeyskaya Street.

By the time we began work, the rooms were warm and comfortable. How did he manage to do it all? The stoves burned firewood and coal, after all.

He was also the senior morgue attendant. He received bodies arriving at all hours of the day and night. He worked quickly, cleanly, and carefully. He did not drink alcohol. He lived near the morgue in a single-story house with his three sisters, two of whom also worked as attendants at the forensic examination office.

"Yegor Stepanovich," I asked him, "have we got anything today?"

"We've got a woman who hanged herself," he replied. "The referral is over there, on the table."

One of our perennial problems was the hasty preparation of referrals for forensic examinations. They were often little more than scribbles, sometimes practically illiterate. The main thing they usually lacked was any account of the circumstances of the case, which forced us to begin our work practically blind.

Fortunately, we had been well trained.

In this case, everything happened as usual. The referral had been written in a sweeping hand on a torn-out page from a school notebook:

"The body of an unidentified woman is hereby submitted for forensic medical examination and determination of the cause of death."

At the bottom was the name of an investigator from the railway prosecutor's office. Instead of a signature, there were a few elaborate squiggles.

Under the law, all unidentified bodies had to be photographed and fingerprinted. That was the responsibility of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Scientific and Technical Department.

In such cases, the forensic medical examiner's work became more complicated. He had to describe the clothing on the body in painstaking detail: the material, color, pattern, cut, style, and condition. He also had to prepare a verbal description of the person and record any distinctive physical features, scars, birthmarks, tattoos, and so on.

But the law was often violated — and, fortunately, not by the forensic medical examiner.

The Scientific and Technical Department did its job poorly. Fingerprinting and photography frequently had to be carried out only after the autopsy. That was what had happened in this case, too.

I called the railway prosecutor's office in advance. The reply was:

"Go ahead with the autopsy. The investigator will come to you later. He's busy at the moment."

I will not describe every detail of the woman's clothing. They are not important to my story. The most significant findings were the characteristics of the ligature mark and the contents of the stomach.

The ligature mark was flat, with a raised ridge of skin along its upper edge. It ran horizontally around the neck and was interrupted at the back, over a distance of three centimeters.

The mark had formed while the woman was alive. The cause of death was mechanical asphyxia due to compression of the neck by a ligature.

The stomach contained a mush of partly digested food, including recognizable pieces of cucumber and beetroot. The characteristics of the ligature mark suggested that a trouser belt had been applied from behind by another person.

To check this hypothesis, I had to wait for the investigator to arrive with the formal order appointing me to conduct the examination.

He appeared at about one o'clock. He was tall, fair-haired, and of indeterminate age. We introduced ourselves. His name was Mikhail Ivanovich.

At last, he told me the circumstances of the case.

The body had been discovered by the driver of a passing train, who reported it to the railway administration. The investigator had gone to the scene for some reason without inviting a forensic medical examiner.

The woman's body had been lying on its back alongside the railway, outside the tracks, five kilometers short of the station at Starye Lipyagi.

The investigator had noticed the ligature mark but had drawn no conclusions. There was no object at the scene that could have produced the mark on the neck. Nor were there any other injuries.

I put forward my assumptions, and the investigator accepted them as the first working theory in the criminal case.

Here was my reasoning.

There was nothing at the place where the body was found that could have been used to hang oneself — or to hang someone else. Committing a murder somewhere else and then carrying the body to the railway would have made little sense.

Therefore, the crime had been committed on a train.

The body bore no injuries or marks suggesting that it had been dragged. So the woman had not been thrown from a moving train. Someone had carried her out and laid her down beside the tracks.

For that to happen, the train must have stopped.

But trains stopped at that particular location only when they were carrying petroleum products.

This meant the woman had been traveling on such a train. More than that, she had been in the vestibule of the last carriage. Otherwise, the murderer would have been better off placing her beneath the wheels rather than laying her beside the railway line. He had been in a hurry.

Who could have done it?

Most likely, someone accompanying the train.

In those days, such trains were accompanied by two conductors. One traveled in the front carriage, immediately behind the locomotive, and was called the chief conductor. The last carriage, the tank car, was accompanied by the senior conductor.

So the crime had probably been committed by the senior conductor.

But which train? Dozens passed through the area every day.

Could the victim herself help us solve the mystery? We knew nothing about her.

To find out, we first had to understand why a woman would travel on such a train when passenger trains ran every hour or hour and a half. Moreover, traveling on freight trains was punishable by law.

Perhaps she was a railway employee. In that case, her presence on a petroleum train would make sense.

The investigator called the conductors' depot from my office and asked the depot manager to come over. The manager arrived and, to our relief, identified the dead woman as one of the depot's employees: Ekaterina Semyonovna Bulgakova.

The next question was: who had seen her last?

Two conductresses were found — Syromyatina and Boborykina. They had seen Bulgakova in the canteen at around noon, when the three women had lunch together. Afterward, Bulgakova was supposed to leave.

"What did she eat?" the investigator asked.

"Vinaigrette and soybeans," one of the conductresses replied.

I had found partly digested pieces of vinaigrette in the woman's stomach. Judging by their condition, the food had been in her stomach for approximately three to three and a half hours.

We added that interval to noon. The estimated time of death came to between three and half past three in the afternoon.

We established which train had stopped at that time and summoned both its chief conductor and its senior conductor.

During questioning, the chief conductor said he knew nothing about the incident. The journey had been perfectly ordinary, with nothing unusual about it.

The senior conductor, however, mentioned one unusual detail: on that trip, he and the chief conductor had exchanged places.

The investigator asked me to examine the chief conductor.

During the examination, I found a reddish-brown abrasion in the form of a stripe on the front of his right thigh.

When I asked how and when he had received it, he replied that he had accidentally scraped himself three days earlier while squeezing between railway carriages.

I rejected his explanation.

He hesitated for a moment, then began to talk.

He had been planning to break up with Bulgakova for some time. They had been having a sexual relationship, but she had become a nuisance. She was blackmailing him, threatening to get him dismissed.

During the Stalin era, sexual relationships involving ordinary Communist Party members were often brought before party committees, which could impose rather unpleasant disciplinary measures.

The plan to kill her had taken shape spontaneously as they traveled in the vestibule of the last carriage.

Standing behind her and embracing her, her lover had slipped his trouser belt around her neck and begun to tighten it. She struck him in the thigh with her foot. He did not let go, feeling her convulsive movements against his body.

Then the movements stopped. She went limp and slid to the floor of the vestibule.

He carried her outside, laid her beside the embankment, and gave the signal for the train to depart.

He Was Going to Ufa

He was going to Ufa. The leave granted by his unit was coming to an end, and he had to hurry. The whole courtyard had turned out to see him off; they drank, sang and celebrated. The farewell feast dragged on, and they had one last drink for the road. He kissed everyone goodbye. To the accompaniment of the bayan, he boarded the train.

He remembered two "pals" getting on board, drinking with them, and then being invited to their compartment. After that came a long stop. He got off the train and dashed into the station, but there was no alcohol for sale. He asked where he could get a drink. "Round the corner," he was told, "there's a place that sells vodka around the clock."

He went outside, and after that everything became hazy. He wandered about somewhere and began to freeze. All the entrances to the apartment blocks were locked, and the shops were shut. His feet slipped on the snow; his hands were freezing, so he tucked them under his armpits, but even there they stayed cold. His tunic did nothing to keep him warm. By good fortune, he spotted an open gate. He stumbled inside, swaying from side to side, caught hold of a wall and followed it to a door. He pulled it towards him; it opened. He went in. It was dark. He opened another door, tripped, fell — and seemed to plunge into an abyss.

The sky is clear, the moon shines bright.
The city lies empty, snowdrifts rise,
And one lone figure trudges through the night,
Without a greatcoat, in his tunic's thin disguise.

Yet perhaps he was born beneath a lucky star:
He stumbles, barely able to stand.
His earthly journey might have ended there—
But a morgue attendant lends a helping hand.

The alarm clock rang. Yegor did not want to get up. The hut had grown bitterly cold, and he hated the thought of leaving the warmth beneath his blanket. He lay for another couple of minutes with his eyes open, then got up, stretched his back until it cracked, and dressed quickly. He pulled on felt boots with galoshes, threw a sheepskin coat over his shoulders, opened the door and slipped into the yard.

The full moon shone, surrounded by a pale halo. "A cold spell coming," he thought as he headed for the morgue. "It must be ten or twelve below now; by morning it'll be twenty-five." He took the keys from his coat pocket, unlocked the door and went in.

The narrow passage between the dead room and the dissection hall was barely wide enough to turn a stretcher around. The dead room was straight ahead, the dissection hall to the left. He opened the left-hand door and went in. The hall was empty and clean. Moonlight fell through the large windows, whose lower halves had been painted white, leaving bright patches on the floor. It was considerably warmer here, though still not warm enough to work comfortably.

He opened the door to the anatomical museum. He did not switch on the light; he knew the building down to the smallest detail. Crossing the hall, he pushed open a side door with his foot and entered the main corridor of the regional forensic medical examination service. There was work to be done. By morning, every room had to be warm enough for the staff to work in their white coats.

He had cleaned the ash from all the stove dampers the previous evening and stacked firewood on the metal sheets beside each stove. He reached into his pocket for matches and found none. He

swore under his breath. How could he have forgotten them? It rarely happened. On his way back, he switched on the light in the dissection hall, left the morgue and pulled the door shut behind him. There was no point locking it with a key. He went back into his hut. There they were — the matches, lying innocently on the table.

Taking them, he headed for the morgue again. To his surprise, the door stood open. He was certain he had pulled it shut. There was no wind that could have blown it open. He entered cautiously and saw that the door to the dead room was ajar. It was always kept tightly closed to prevent rats from getting in; for the same reason, its outside was clad in metal. Rats were the morgue's worst enemies. They gnawed at the dead, especially their noses and ears. Yegor remembered the time Viktor Petrovich Golubev had had to perform reconstructive surgery on a nose, and even then had been unable to restore it completely. The scandal had been enormous, and reprimands had rained down on the morgue staff.

The attendant's first impulse was to shut the door and get on with lighting the stoves. But he did not. He called the police instead.

Two sergeants arrived. Yegor led them to the door of the dead room and explained what had alarmed him. There was no electric light in the room. The sergeants nudged each other but would not cross the threshold. Yegor asked one of them for his pocket torch and went inside. The beam swept across the bodies. Then it picked out the green of a military tunic.

"I didn't take him in!" the attendant said firmly. "Where did he come from? There's blood by his nose. Wait — he may still be alive. He's breathing!"

The policemen flatly refused to enter. With difficulty, Yegor dragged the soldier into the corridor.

"Call transport," he told them. "Get him to hospital, and quickly — or he really will end up as one of ours!"

"Maybe he isn't ours yet," one of the sergeants said. "This is a matter for the military commandant's office!"

"When he's dead, he'll be yours," Yegor retorted angrily, "and you'll be answerable for his death."

The threat worked. Five minutes later, the police's operational vehicle — nicknamed the "crayfish neck" because of its paintwork — was, for the first time in the morgue's history, carrying a living person out of the dead room.

Unbelievable, But It Happened!

People say Monday is an unlucky day. Perhaps they are right. At any rate, many people would remember this particular Monday for the rest of their lives.

It began wonderfully. Not a single corpse had arrived by morning. In a city of a million people, that was rare. Only a handful of living people came in for examinations. I sat down to write reports; time was pressing. We were allowed no more than three days to issue an expert opinion, after which we had to provide written explanations.

Outside, leaves were falling. Yellow, dry leaves carpeted the pavements. As you walked, you could kick them into the air and watch them settle again. It was still relatively warm, and the day was clear and sunny.

At about ten, the railway police called to say they were bringing in a body. Ten minutes earlier, a man had carelessly crossed the railway tracks in violation of the rules, been run over by a train, lost both legs and died at the scene. Doctors from the railway clinic had certified his death.

Five minutes later, a vehicle drove into the yard of the regional forensic medical examination service. The men unloaded the body of a man of about forty, of above-average build, wearing a brown jacket. The severed lower limbs, amputated at the middle third of the thighs, were brought in with him. The belt of abrasion, crushed soft tissues and traces of grease were consistent with the telephone report. The body came with a referral signed by the deputy head of the transport police department of the Kuibyshev Railway.

I saw a fresh corpse, legs gone—
And what a thing to happen then!
We began the post-mortem, and everyone
Could see—

The dead man's heart beat again.
The heart contracted, fluttered, stirred,
While the man himself lay still.
Then the beating stopped—

And suddenly began again.

Yegor Stepanovich, the attendant, transferred the body to a trolley and wheeled it into the dead room. Just then Viktor Petrovich Golubev appeared, probably our most experienced forensic medical examiner. He was lean, extraordinarily energetic, and had his hair clipped almost to the roots. He also headed the forensic medicine department at the Kuibyshev Correspondence Law Institute.

A group of students had come for his practical class. Many were middle-aged, and several wore uniforms. I noticed two second-class legal advisers among them.

"Have we got anything today?" he asked me — I was the first person he saw. "I've got a practical session on railway trauma!"

"We do, Viktor Petrovich," I said. "But the man has been dead for no more than an hour."

At the time, regulations required that a post-mortem examination not be performed until at least twelve hours after death. Viktor Petrovich scratched the back of his bald head and gave an order:

"Put him on the table!"

Yegor wheeled the trolley into the dissection hall, lifted the body onto the table and began removing the clothes. Golubev dictated a description of the clothing, its details and the damage to a typist, commenting as he went for the benefit of the students. There were about fifteen of them,

standing at least a meter and a half from the table, craning their necks to see. Our rules were clear: only forensic medical examiners performed dissections. Attendants were responsible for undressing the body, sawing open the skull, sewing up the incisions and dressing the body again.

The attendant undressed the dead man and stepped aside, waiting for his turn to work. Golubev, dressed for the procedure in a gown, oilskin apron and sleeves, rubber gloves and a white cap, took a long amputation knife and opened the body in one stroke, from the chin to the pubis. Then he opened the chest.

Without removing the block of internal organs, he took a pair of scissors and opened the pericardium, the sac around the heart. And everyone present — including me — saw the heart contracting. Slowly, but in its characteristic sequence: first the atria, then the ventricles; atria, ventricles.

A deathly silence fell. Every eye was fixed on the body's principal engine. Viktor Petrovich froze, too. Then, with a single movement, he severed the heart from the blood vessels and asked me to bring a dish and Ringer's solution.

I brought what he needed. Golubev placed the detached heart in the dish and poured the solution over it. The heart continued to contract rhythmically, in the same orderly sequence. Golubev began explaining the heart's conduction system and its automaticity to the students. I doubt anyone was listening. Everyone was staring at the beating heart.

It continued working for twenty-four minutes. Then it stopped.

The class was over. By the next day, the city was buzzing with rumours that the forensic medical service was dissecting living people.

The next morning Viktor Petrovich arrived looking drawn, his eyes red and slightly swollen. He could not have turned gray overnight; his hair was already gray. His breath smelled faintly of alcohol, although everyone in the department knew that Golubev never touched a drink.

We understood that the matter would not simply go away. I buried myself in books, searching for anything similar. I reread the works of Bruhoneнko, Negovsky, Emmert and Hofmann — and found it: descriptions of two cases in which the heart had continued to work after biological death. That was enough.

After lunch the following day, Golubev was summoned to the Kuibyshev regional party committee. None of us asked him what had been said there. In my mind, I pictured the expert, whose career had begun before the Revolution and who had trained at the Sorbonne in France, having to justify himself before amateurs in medicine — and not only in medicine.

We knew that our lives were often regulated and directed by people who understood nothing about the specialist matters they presumed to judge. Yet no one could change the system. Instructions from above carried more weight than the law. Viktor Petrovich managed to defend himself before the party authorities. Whether we could justify ourselves in the eyes of ordinary citizens was another question.

He or She?

She or he — is that really an idle question?
Like spears, the laws are aimed at them;
Officials drive them to tears—
The heartless know nothing of suffering.

That day I was on duty examining living people. Once a week, I had to listen to a stream of complaints, many showing clear signs of exaggeration. To be frank, examining living people was tiring and not particularly interesting. Your judgement was confined by a list of rules you were not allowed to cross. It could be deeply unpleasant to classify injuries as minor when your feelings rebelled against the law.

I was assisted by two people: a typist-secretary, who prepared two copies of each forensic examination report — one for the person examined, the other for my files — and a nurse, who would apply a fresh dressing when necessary. It was routine work, chiefly concerned with determining the severity of bodily injuries, a decision that could determine whether a criminal case would be opened or the victim would have to bring a private prosecution.

But now, at last, something more interesting seemed to be happening. A police officer entered carrying a passport and a referral asking me to determine the sex of the person to be examined. He showed me the passport. The endings of the surname, first name and patronymic had been altered: "Valentina Fyodorovna Vasilyeva" had been changed to "Valentin Fyodorovich Vasilyev."

"Doctor, shall I bring him in?" the sergeant asked.

"Yes, yes. Let him come in."

The policeman went out into the corridor, and the person I was to examine entered. A giant stood before me: six feet three inches tall, broad-shouldered and powerfully built. His hair was the color of ripe wheat, cropped short in a masculine style. His face was oval, his skin delicate, and there was no trace of facial hair. His eyes were blue, and he watched me warily.

I asked him to undress. He removed his checked shirt, revealing a male torso, with clearly defined, powerful pectoral muscles. There were no signs of breasts, only the small, typical male nipples. His biceps were enormous, and his fists resembled heavy hammers.

"Take off your trousers," I said.

He hesitated for a second, then unbuckled his belt and lowered them.

"Everything off. The underpants too," I said firmly.

He blushed but obeyed. I saw a narrow male pelvis, but the pubic hair followed a female pattern, forming a triangle. And the external genitalia were female.

I asked him to lie on the gynaecological examination chair. He refused.

"Doctor," he said, almost in tears, "when will all this end? There's no living like this! Everyone who wants to make trouble for us keeps interfering!"

"Who do you mean by 'us'? " I asked.

"Well, me and my wife!" he almost shouted.

"And where is she?"

"Out there, in the corridor."

"Ask her to come in, and you wait outside," I told him.

He dressed and left. A woman entered: a handsome brunette, well built and fashionably dressed. I invited her to sit down, and she lowered herself into the chair with a sigh.

"Tell me a little about yourself — and about your husband," I said.

She told me that she was twenty-four and had a three-year-old child from her first marriage. She did not work; she was supported by her second husband, the young person who had just left the room. He was nineteen.

They had lived together for a year and adored each other. They lived in Padovka, a small station on the Kuibyshev Railway. Her husband worked as a striker in a village smithy and earned good money. In the village, everyone regarded him as a man, she said, but the police would not leave them alone. Whenever they checked identity documents, the trouble began again. “Please help us, Doctor!”

I asked her to leave and send her husband back in. She went out. My sympathies were with them. I understood the nature of the relationship between them.

Her life was comfortable enough: she did not work, money was not a serious problem, and her child was well cared for. But what of the future? Might she one day find a replacement? The “husband’s” situation was far more complicated. He displayed pronounced masculinisation, apparently associated with hormonal abnormalities and, in turn, with aspects of his psychological and sexual development. That much was clear to me. But how was I to document it properly?

When Vasilyev returned, I suggested that he accompany me to the Kuibyshev Institute for the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, and asked for a consultation. Fortunately, the institute was only two hundred meters from the regional forensic medical service.

I examined Vasilyev on a gynaecological chair, in the presence of a professor and two assistants. Within the labia majora, we could feel soft, oval structures — testes. The uterus was severely underdeveloped and incapable of supporting reproduction.

Back in my office, I wrote my conclusion with a light heart: the person examined was male.

“Well,” I told them both, “your ordeal is over. Have your passports changed, get married, and be happy!”

To be honest, I was pleased myself. To see the joy on their faces — and to know I had played a part in it — was real happiness.

Out of Mercy Alone

They loved each other so much that nothing could come between them. He had survived the war, and she had waited for him. She waited a long time; it seemed an eternity, but at last he came home to the village. All his possessions fitted into a soldier's kitbag. His clothes consisted of a greatcoat and his uniform. She, too, owned little more than a small suitcase. The important thing was that they had both survived. His wounds did not matter; nor did the conspicuous scars on her legs left by deep ulcers caused by vitamin deficiency.

The villagers pooled what they could and held a wedding. They built themselves a dugout. Like the couple, the collective farm was slowly getting back on its feet. They ploughed with cows and oxen and survived the poor harvest of 1946. Then at last the sun seemed to shine on the dispossessed. They laid the foundations of a house. They worked in the fields and at home, from dawn until dusk. When darkness fell, they lay close together, caressing each other with hands hardened by labor and kissing bodies salted by the sweat of work.

Life began to settle into a routine, but they were not blessed with children. No matter how hard they tried, nothing happened. Irina even went to the village of Svyatoye and drank water from a supposedly healing spring, but it did no good. They were still young; there was time, and hope remained.

Soon the house was finished, and they had everything other people had. It was bright and spacious, the finest house in the village. Ignat Savelyev was gifted with his hands; he decorated the house with carved woodwork and made an intricately carved porch. But still there were no children. Irina wept and prayed to God. Who was to blame? Was this punishment for some sin? And what sin could it be? Who knew?

They never consulted doctors. They seemed to have everything, yet their life would not come together. No children's voices rang through the house. It was empty, like a nest in which no eggs had been laid or hatched. He reproached her; she blamed him. Ignat began looking at other women, and she grew jealous of every woman he spoke to. They had once loved each other. What remained of that love now?

Perhaps from sorrow, perhaps for some other reason, Irina fell ill. She wasted away before their eyes. She went to doctors in Livny and traveled to Oryol to see regional specialists. She tried countless medicines, but nothing helped; she continued to waste away. They said her metabolism was disturbed, but never explained which substances were involved. Perhaps the doctors themselves did not know. Before long, she was little more than skin and bones. Neither living nor dying, she lingered on.

The local feldsher visited every day, listened to her chest, tapped here and there, prescribed a mixture and left. Neither the feldsher nor the village healers could help. Irina told her husband, "That dugout sucked the life out of me. It drained my health. Look at me — nothing left but my nose and this sharp chin."

On one of the feldsher's regular visits, she found Irina washed, dressed in clean clothes and lying in a coffin. Ignat told her, "Well, Inga Vasilyevna, my Irina has passed away. She's gone to the next world without a final word. She suffered terribly, poor soul. You know that yourself — you were often in our house. Irina asked that they not perform an autopsy. So have mercy, please. Let her go to God whole and untouched."

"Of course, of course," Inga Vasilyevna nodded, sitting at the table and writing out a death certificate. The law allowed her to do so, and she exercised that right fully. The only thing was, when issuing the certificate, she might at least have examined the body. But she did not. What more can one say? She had shown human compassion.

Then anonymous letters began arriving at the prosecutor's office, providing grounds for an exhumation. The body was exhumed. It was decomposed, but that did not prevent me from finding a

penetrating hole of regular triangular shape in the scale of the occipital bone. The shaft of a steelyard found during a search of the house allowed me to conclude that this was the weapon used to strike her.

Ignat Savelyev was charged with intentional murder.

"I didn't want to kill her," the dead woman's husband protested. "But I suffered watching her suffer. I think she would have blessed me for it. God sees that I did it out of mercy!"

Money, Money…

The Soviet authorities took care to ensure that no corrupting wealth accumulated in our pockets. Everything had been calculated in advance: the consumer basket, recreation, health care. Unfortunately, the authorities could not predict natural disasters or social upheavals and, as a rule, were unprepared to deal with them.

Every family, every individual in the country was a miniature reflection of the peculiarities of society as a whole. With low wages, there was little chance of accumulating much. And the needs of the soul and the stomach were not taken into account by the state. So those who hungered and thirsted for more had to find the necessary tugriks somewhere — or borrow them.

Abroad, the credit system had been perfected down to the smallest detail. Ours remained undeveloped, existing on a haphazard, improvised basis. Anyone who lent money took a risk. The borrower had less to lose: his only real risk was to his reputation.

That is why it was surprising that anyone could be found willing to lend money, even modest sums, to people whose reputations were badly tarnished.

Eduard Loskutov was one such man. He lived on the ground floor of a two-storey building on Slava Street in Kerch. His apartment was small, consisting of a single room and a kitchen. The furnishings were extremely Spartan. There was a bed and a stool in the room. In the kitchen stood a table, and on it lay two bowls and a glass. The owner needed nothing more.

He could not stand anything that might be called work. He had repeatedly been prosecuted for parasitism, yet he had learned nothing from these encounters and continued to live according to his own philosophy.

He caused no trouble for anyone in the building. During the day, it was impossible to find him at home. In the evening, he would stagger back, climb into bed — often without even taking off his clothes — and fall peacefully asleep.

He paid his utility bills punctually, so the housing office had no grounds to impose any compulsory sanctions on him.

And then, suddenly, something happened.

On a stifling August night, the tenants of the neighbouring apartment were disturbed by unusual noises coming from the home of their elusive neighbor. The following morning, while taking his dog out for a walk, one of them noticed that the windows of Loskutov's apartment stood open. Despite the bright sunshine, the electric light was on inside. That had never happened before.

He peered through the window and saw Eduard lying on his bed. Bloodstains were visible on the blanket and sheets.

The neighbor immediately called the militia.

I arrived with them.

Loskutov's dead body lay on its back. His open eyes stared dully at the ceiling. His mouth was slightly open, as though he had died in the middle of a scream. His sharp chin, covered in long-neglected stubble, jutted forward. His body was shockingly thin, and his skin had the extreme pallor characteristic of death from massive blood loss.

There were numerous superficial wounds on the front of his neck. More accurately, they were little more than incisions in the skin; none reached the subcutaneous tissue. Similar cuts marked the front surfaces of his forearms.

The scene gave the impression that Loskutov had attempted suicide by cutting his veins but had lacked the resolve to go through with it. He had merely made a few tentative cuts.

A penetrating wound lay along the midline of the upper abdomen. The character of its edges and the condition of its angles allowed me to conclude that it had been inflicted with a knife.

My initial opinion was that this was a case of suicide. I shared it with the investigators.

They disagreed.

And they had grounds for doing so: the knife was missing. It was nowhere in the kitchen, nor in the room where the body had been found.

Of course, one might have assumed that, after stabbing himself and beginning to bleed to death, Loskutov had somehow thrown the knife out of the window. But a search beneath the window produced nothing.

We were forced to conclude that the knife had been taken away by the person responsible for the killing. In other words, this was murder.

The superficial cuts now appeared in an entirely different light. The perpetrator had not acted in haste. He had inflicted the wounds deliberately, causing pain while knowing perfectly well that they could not be fatal.

Their number suggested that considerable time had elapsed between one cut and the next.

In other words, the victim had been subjected to an interrogation under torture.

The criminal had been demanding something from his victim, using pain to force him to comply. Only when he failed to obtain what he wanted did he lose his temper and plunge the knife into Loskutov's abdomen.

During the autopsy, I discovered that the wound had damaged a major blood vessel, causing profuse bleeding. The abdominal cavity was filled with blood — approximately two liters. For a man, losing even half a liter of blood rapidly can be dangerous.

A woman can sometimes withstand a greater loss without a comparable threat to her life, since her body is accustomed to losing blood every month, in roughly that same quantity.

So what had someone been torturing Loskutov for? What valuable possession could he have owned?

Neither the state of his apartment nor his way of life suggested that Eduard kept anything of value. Perhaps someone had been demanding repayment of a debt?

That theory was certainly plausible.

One thing was puzzling, however. What could anyone have lent money against, given Loskutov's circumstances? Everyone in the neighbourhood knew he was financially hopeless.

The only thing he owned was his apartment.

Could he have borrowed money by pledging it as security?

The investigators began pursuing this lead.

It led them to one of the other residents of the building. The man desperately wanted the elderly tenants out of the way; they had become a nuisance to him. So he began lending money to the drunkard, using the latter's apartment as collateral.

Apparently, it had never occurred to him that by killing his debtor, he would not only fail to bring himself any closer to his goal but would also risk losing his own freedom.

What can you do when reason fails at precisely the wrong moment?

Asmodeus's Tricks

When Asmodeus — the lame demon of lust, whose features embody the attributes of the ancient Greek god Himeros — interferes in human relationships, situations arise that inevitably bring morality into conflict with the law. Yet our investigators often struggle to determine how such offenses should be classified.

In the city of Kerch, there were two men who suffered from an uncontrollable urge to expose their genitals in public and masturbate. One preferred to appear during the day beneath the windows of the medical college, whose students were predominantly young women. The other chose the evening hours, frequenting the busiest spots in the city center.

This condition is known as exhibitionism. Naturally, it is regarded as a violation of public decency, and those who suffer from it can be treated. In our country, however, these men had been arrested repeatedly and, in the absence of a specific provision in the law, sentenced for petty hooliganism to up to fifteen days of detention, during which they were put to physical labor.

Once their sentences had been served, they simply resumed their activities.

The shortcomings of our legislation governing sexual relations created considerable difficulties for both investigators and the courts. I do not mean to suggest that everything in this respect was perfect in other countries.

In some American states, for example, harsh Puritan laws once existed under which a woman who gave birth to a child outside marriage was subjected to public condemnation — a peculiar form of civil execution. She was displayed on a scaffold with a huge red letter A sewn onto her dress, marking her out as an outcast.

In France, laws regulating private conduct were once enforced by special police units, sometimes resulting in heavy fines and even imprisonment. Yet the application of these laws was not always consistent, and certain areas, including the Bois de Boulogne, were treated differently.

The legislation in force in our country distinguished between rape and other offences involving sexual conduct. It also provided, at least in theory, for a separate category of indecent acts. Why do I distinguish this third category separately? The law treated such acts as a distinct offence because they did not constitute sexual intercourse. The victims were children, most often girls.

Children are easily influenced, and their testimony must therefore be assessed critically. Superficial injuries to the genital area cannot, in themselves, be regarded as conclusive evidence. Such injuries may be self-inflicted by a child, for example when pinworms cause itching and scratching around the anus and genitals.

In Kerch, I encountered a case in which an elderly man was accused of committing indecent acts against two girls, aged eight and ten. Their parents alleged that their elderly neighbor had been inviting the girls into his apartment, offering them sweets, and then…

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