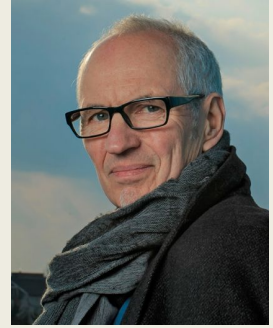
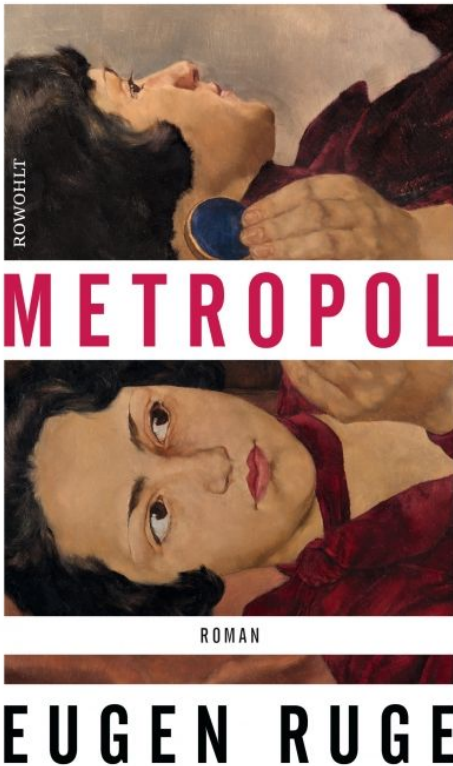


Eugen Ruge

METROPOL



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432 pages

“A work that tears down the wall between the Russian epic and the great American novel.” *New York Times* on *In Times of Fading Light*

The end of a love affair. A powerful, fact-based novel.

Moscow, 1936. Charlotte, a German communist, has narrowly evaded capture by the Nazis. In late summer that year, she embarks on a journey lasting several weeks through her new *Heimat*, the Soviet Union, accompanied by her husband Wilhelm and Jill, a young British woman. The heat is overpowering and Stalin's beaches are stony and narrow. The travellers feel oppressed by a tension that soon becomes visceral and forges a connection amongst the group more intense than they immediately realise. All of them work for the intelligence organisation of the Comintern that employs communists from around the world. Yet one of the “enemies of the people” on trial in Moscow is someone Lotte knows well, better than she would like.

Metropol follows three people navigating conviction and knowledge, loyalty and obedience, suspicion and betrayal. The political terror of the 1930s is unfathomable in its horror. But some people's personal beliefs are equally shocking.

“The most likely details are fiction,” writes Eugen Ruge, “but the most unlikely ones are true.” The woman with the codename ‘Lotte Germaine’ who found herself at the Hotel Metropol at the end of that momentous summer was Ruge's grandmother.

- Recommended by New Books in German (Goethe Institute).
- Ruge's novel *In Times of Fading Light* was awarded the German Book Prize in 2011.
- *In Times of Fading Light* sold 600,000 copies and was translated into 28 languages.

Eugen Ruge, born in the Urals, studied mathematics in Berlin and became a member of the research staff at the Central Institute for Geophysics in Potsdam. He left the GDR for the West in 1988, where he began working as a writer and translator. He was awarded the Schiller Prize and a grant from the state of Baden Württemberg for his dramatic works. His first novel, *In Times of Fading Light*, was an international success and received numerous awards, including the Alfred Döblin Prize, the Aspekte Prize for Literature, and the German Book Prize. 2013 saw the publication of *Cabo de Gata*. A collection of plays and Approaches: *Impressions of 14 Countries* followed.

Eugen Ruge
METROPOL

English sample translation by Daniel Bowles

1 Black Black Sea

– *Charlotte* –

On the night from August 20th to 21st, 1936, Charlotte Germaine — as she's been calling herself lately — discovers in the *German Central Newspaper*, among the sixteen defendants listed in the *Criminal Trial of the Trotskyist–Zinovievist Terrorist Center*, the name M. Lure.

At this moment she's aboard the Black Sea steamship *Grusia*, which is nevertheless still securely moored at the pier in Batumi; not until the following morning will the vessel put to sea. She sits at a tray table in a rather uncomfortable position, holding the newspaper at an angle toward the porthole, through which a cold, bluish glow one might mistake for moonlight comes streaming in; it emanates, however, from a harbor lantern. She is dressed in a nightshirt: cotton, white.

The grunting of the ship's engines can be heard. Wheezing snores issue from the top berth. That's Wilhelm. He's adopted the alias Jean Germaine, but everyone calls him Hans, except Charlotte, who still says Wilhelm. It's difficult to call a metalworker with an Anhaltinian accent Jean Germaine.

Wilhelm has drunk vodka, and quite a bit at that. To our homeland! To Stalin! That's a toast nobody can decline, especially not a man, but even Charlotte wasn't able to avoid it entirely. After sightseeing in the city – at 36°C – there was another, how should one put it?, *reception* at the home of the district secretary, a Georgian with a handlebar mustache and a voice like a locomotive: hoho, he's onto them: Comintern, fifth floor! Wink wink. To you, Comrades! And to Comrade Stalin!

All accompanied by pickles, green onions, and aspic.

Falling asleep took no time at all, a brief alcoholic nap from which she woke up again right away. She tossed and turned for a while, hoping to conquer the incipient headache through autosuggestion. But then when her bladder also began to strain, she jolted herself up and made her way to the toilet, which was located, alas, outside the cabin.

When she returned, she caught a glimpse of the *German Central Newspaper*. It was lying on the tray table with light shining on it. Charlotte began reading, intending to read herself back to sleep.

It'd been days since she'd even looked at a newspaper. They aren't easy to come by while traveling; on account of the paper shortage in the Soviet Union, even the party press is scarce. That's why she is surprised so much by the content of the lead article that for a moment she thinks the librarian in Batumi had given Wilhelm an archival issue; here it's talking about the criminal case against *Zinoviev and Others*. Hasn't Zinoviev been in prison for two years? That man with the tall fur cap upon that crown of curly hair. The handsomest of them all, she always thought. It'd shocked her that he'd been convicted; after all, he'd been an ally of Lenin's and for a time even head of the Comintern.

This is the most recent issue, though: *Trial against Zinoviev and Others*. Not good nighttime reading, so Charlotte turns past the feature story. But even the following pages are filled with the trial. The indictment is printed, abridged, but still runs to two whole pages. Charlotte thumbs past the indictment, too – or wants to, when her eyes are snagged by the name *M. Lure*.

She knows a M. Lure.

Moisei Lure. Whose actual name is Alexander Emel. Or more precisely, whose actual name is Moisei Lure, though most everyone knows him only by his party name, Alexander Emel. But that her Alexander Emel might be one and the same with that M. Lure, *an agent of Trotsky sent from abroad*, as the newspaper reads, said to

have *headed a task force organized by an active German fascist?* That is absurd. How is Alexander Emel, a Jew no less!, persecuted by the Nazis no less!, supposed to have *headed a task force organized by an active German fascist?*

Charlotte hears her heart thumping so loudly that for a few beats it drowns out Wilhelm's snoring. *Planning of attacks on Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov ...* what's happening is unbelievable. She nearly feels something akin to rage. Why the constant party purges and investigations? For two whole years they've been going on. So much paperwork! So many life histories! So many commissions! Yes, she approves of it all, but at some point they simply have to get results ...

She turns to the last page of the indictment. Here they are listed again, all sixteen, numbered, with first name and patronymic, along with their birth year. Number fifteen: Lure, Moisei Ilyich. And at the end, in parentheses: *alias Emel, Alexander.*

3 No Other Country on Earth

– *Charlotte* –

On the evening of August 22nd, they dock in Yalta. The magnificent harbor buildings already glow red in the sunset. The mountains on the horizon: black. This city, nestled into the slope between pines and pointed cypresses. Houses with oriels, columns, and little staircases. Until now Charlotte has only ever seen something so beautiful in pictures.

The road leads uphill. Their suitcases are transported by donkey cart (they are assured there's an automobile, but it was just sent for *remont* – for repair). Jilly is over the moon with excitement. They trudge behind the cart. Suddenly the wind dies down completely. Warmth radiates up from the ground. Charlotte begins sweating. Wilhelm brings up the rear in silence. Since reading the article, he hasn't uttered a word. The only thing he said, quivering with reproach, was:

Your Emel!

The donkey billows with dust when they pet him. He also does so when the man, the driver of the donkey cart, a dark-skinned *muzhik* with gray stubble, raps him on the rump with a little stick: casually, not hard, but at regular intervals.

Jilly tries to persuade the man that the donkey can walk of its own accord, without prodding. The man is amiable, even good-natured. He smiles at Jill, nodding, but he doesn't understand her. Nor does he understand her when Charlotte translates. He simply doesn't comprehend the problem, striking once more in order to show how dust billows up from the animal. Charlotte gives up. Who knows what donkeys feel anyhow?

They move into their rooms in the vacation home of the Union of Political Workers. It smells damp, almost a bit musty, but Charlotte is determined to designate it the smell of vacation. She opens the window. The view is overwhelming, downright incredible. She's never seen such a thing in her life. Palm trees, the sea, sunset – you almost want to drink in the sight, eat it up, to devour it or something. Wilhelm stands beside her, but she senses that he sees none of it.

We have to tell Jill, Wilhelm says.

But why?

We have to make it clear that we aren't planning to keep it a secret.

But we haven't done anything.

We are on friendly terms with an enemy of the people.

Enemy of the people. It affects her that Wilhelm actually calls him that. She asks aloud: What do you mean *on friendly terms*? We know him. Everyone knows him, hundreds of comrades.

Wilhelm glances at her briefly, askance, from the corners of his eyes. Then he turns his gaze to the sea, which is now indeed black beneath the distant red-gleaming sky, and says quietly, but in a tone he might use to declaim an ancient tragedy:

We sold him a gramophone.

So what, Charlotte thinks.

They come to dinner a bit too late because they shower beforehand; the sullen woman on duty assigns them a place at the far edge, with no view. Jill makes faces, playing the scolded child who's done something wrong and yet is still granted the grace of dinner. Whenever the woman on duty approaches, Jill courteously folds her hands on the table.

Charlotte imitates her. Wilhelm stares into space. At least he could be persuaded to put off his matter until tomorrow.

The women agree to make their way one more time tonight to the harbor boardwalk, the music from which can be heard all the way up here. They walk down the slope, in haste, as though they might arrive too late, with Wilhelm striding behind at some distance. By now the stars have come out. The wind off the water is mild and every so often smells of unfamiliar fruits.

The boardwalk is still burgeoning with people. There's a dance floor outside. Wilhelm doesn't like dancing, but here women dance with one another, too. Charlotte dances with Jilly and has a shot at the man's role: leading. Jill is so light, so lithe. They're playing jazz or swing, or at any rate something American.

Charlotte is reminded of an evening at Isa and Emel's, a kind of get-together the Russians call a *vecher*, which basically only means evening, though the word has sadly taken on an unpleasant connotation once it became apparent that conversations at these so-called *vechers* veered toward politically suspect topics. But we never had any political conversations! At least none that were politically suspect ... Suddenly the people on the dance floor start pattering their feet, forward, back, short-short, long, some kind of trendy dance. That's shag, Jilly says, without knowing to do it either. They mimic the others' steps, laughing, stumbling, stepping on each other's feet. Incidentally, he's a good dancer, Emel. She remembers him twirling her across the cramped dance floor. She remembers, now on her way back, his hand on her waist ... the hand, as Wilhelm puts it, of an enemy of the people.

At breakfast, Wilhelm informs Jilly about their being acquainted with Emel, as Charlotte takes notice: acquainted, not on friendly terms with. But Jill doesn't seem

especially interested. Wilhelm tried to spell out the problem to her with his few scraps of English. Ultimately Charlotte has to translate anyway.

Jilly nods, taking it all in. She wants to go to the beach. Patiently she listens to Wilhelm's explanation, but even when she finally understands, she's not particularly impressed: So they knew this, what was his name again?, Emel. So what?

Charlotte shoots Wilhelm a glance: Told you!

The beach is a minor disappointment. Since she'd only ever made it to the North Sea before now, Charlotte assumed beaches were always wide and sandy. Now she also learns they can be narrow and rocky, too. What's more, it's incredibly full, a swarm of half-naked people, lying beside one another an arm's reach away. They huddle in the shade beneath beach umbrellas or wear handkerchiefs knotted at four corners on their heads. They wear hats, caps, or genuine turbans. Fat Soviet women, normally a prudish species, as even Charlotte herself thinks, wade into the water with no inhibition in just their underwear.

The noise level is tremendous. The sea roars. The people talk, jabber, laugh. Squawking children hop past, dispensing splatters of seawater into the surrounding area. Ship horns drone off in the distance, and from the boardwalk, penetrating through all the bustle and clamor in irregular crescendos, comes the music from a concert on a dais.

They unfurl their beach towels and like everyone else place them directly on the sun-warmed stones. Charlotte makes a pillow from clothing and shoes and retrieves her Tretyakov, his story of the Arctic Ocean expedition. But Wilhelm has brought along a *Pravda* from the union house would like Charlotte to find out whether there's anything new about the trial in it.

He hands her the newspaper, then teeters off into the water, like a fakir balancing upon a bed of nails, reedy and pale among all the tanned bodies. Jill, too, bolts toward the water, returning immediately with an enthusiastic interim report

on the incredible temperatures and charging off again while Wilhelm, calm and untiring, swims to the buoy and back, after which he dries himself off with military thoroughness even though the air here would do it for him.

Anything about the trial? he asks.

The newspaper is brimming with it. Even the interrogations have been reproduced, for everyone to read. And today, of all days, the transcript of Moisei Lure's interrogation is in *Pravda*. Charlotte skimmed it the whole time Wilhelm was in the water. What's happening there is unbelievable. For minutes at a time she's gone, rapt. Feeling nothing of the heat, hearing none of the noise surrounding her, not the ship horns, nor the squawking of the children. Alexander Emel actually confesses to having been involved in terrorist attacks and Trotskyist conspiracies. He simply confesses! The only thing he denies is having participated in the attack on Stalin. Yet the relief Charlotte feels yields immediately to horror: wouldn't that then mean by implication that the *other* charges are true? Why, for heaven's sake, should he admit the *one* but dispute the *other*?

Nothing new, Charlotte asserts. To a certain extent that's true, as the accusations were of course more or less to be found in the indictment. What *is* new, however, is Emel's confession. What *is* new is that Charlotte asks herself whether it's possible for someone to play-act to such a degree that he could have given her the runaround for years. Who is Alexander Emel?

Jilly holds out an ice cream. The beach has returned. The warm stones, the women in underwear, the caps and hats. Even Wilhelm is now wearing on his head one of those handkerchiefs knotted at four corners. A familiar melody wafts over from the dais, an earworm from a film that's extremely popular right now and that they've been singing everywhere lately.

Two days later, it says in *Pravda* that all the accused have been condemned to death by firing squad. The sentences have already been carried out. Wilhelm, who's

already managed to get a slight sunburn, flushes yellow at this news. And Charlotte has reason to suspect that her face is taking on a similar hue. From this moment on they must endure exactly fourteen more days in Yalta.

They go to the beach every day. Charlotte attempts to read her book about the polar expedition. Wilhelm eats ice cream incessantly and swims. Jill is always out and about. Suddenly has contact with young Russian women who give her sweets. Comes running up every now and again to ask what this or that is called in Russian.

At one point they visit the Chekhov House, where it comes to light that Jilly in fact scarcely knows anything more than his name and Wilhelm hasn't ever read anything by him. Sadly, the house is closed: *remont*. One can only peek through the garden gate.

Wilhelm ponders the slightly run-down but still gorgeous white house and its gigantic lawn. Asks whether Chekhov was rich – at which Charlotte cannot stop herself from informing him that Chekhov was a doctor, and that he treated the poor at no cost.

One time they stroll the length of the boardwalk, to the Lenin Monument and a bit beyond it. They drink bright, bitter kvass, tapped cool from large tanks. They try on sun hats. Jilly attempts to buy a postcard. Strangely, not one is to be found even though there are kiosks that look as if they'd been erected expressly to sell them.

Another time they run into Rudi Vollmer, an old acquaintance of Wilhelm's from his time at the Goerz company, along with Rudi's wife. Wilhelm tells him straightaway of their casual acquaintance with Emel. Rudi grows very quiet, and his wife realizes that they no longer have any time at all to share a cup of tea together. It doesn't help that Wilhelm makes assurances that they'll of course report the matter to the party leadership immediately after their return. The two politely take their leave and vanish, never to be seen again.

There's still one more week left.

In the mornings they sleep in (or at least act as if they do).

They appear punctually at mealtimes in the union house, where there are green apples for dessert every day and the woman on duty seats them at the end with the same sullen gesture as she had on the first day, when they arrived too late.

They go to the concert on the dais.

They collect shells.

They act out vacation.

They act out: Life has become better, life has become more cheerful!

Until Wilhelm begins to vomit.

1 Metropol

– *Charlotte* –

When approaching the Hotel Metropol from the Neglinnaya, one comes right up to the former main entrance with a gable mosaic gleaming high above it. This mosaic is one of the last works by the famous Jugendstil painter Vrubel. It depicts a sailboat with a red-garbed figure standing against its mast, toward whom a beautiful blonde woman seems to fly from the nearing shore. The scene is derived from the Romantic verse drama *The Princess Far-Away* by Edmond Rostand. It is about a nobleman who fervently worships the Princess Mèlissinde despite having never seen her. In the end, he travels across the sea to realize his dream, yet is stricken en route by a grievous illness, leaving him unable any longer, once at his destination, even to set foot on that coveted land.

On September 23, *Pravda* declares the party purge finished, under the headline *For a Radiant and Pulsating Life in the Party*.

On September 26, Genrikh Yagoda, the head of the domestic secret police, the NKVD, is replaced by Nikolai Yezhov.

On September 29, Francisco Franco is named generalissimo of all national Spanish forces.

On September 30, *Pravda* declares that the purge of the party has proven insufficient. That same day, at the offices of the Comintern, Charlotte submits her written statement on the matter of Emel in person.

Ten days later – Wilhelm has meanwhile been discharged from the hospital and has composed his own statement that accords in all points – Charlotte and Wilhelm receive an order to vacate their living quarters in Point Two. Furniture

and photographic equipment are to stay put. Wilhelm must surrender his 6.35mm Korovin. They receive no further details – just an instruction to lodge at the Hotel Metropol, at the expense of the Communist International.

Naturally, Charlotte knows the Hotel Metropol. Everyone does. A sprawling Jugendstil beauty in the heart of the city. Standing kitty-corner to it is the Bolshoi Theater. One wing of the hotel borders Revolution Square, which in turn directly abuts Red Square. Erected on the other side of the square is the Hotel Moskva with the new *Glavparfumer* – the Main Parfumer – on its ground floor, where Charlotte bought her lipstick before the holidays: *Life has become better, life has become more cheerful!*

Charlotte has even been inside the Metropol, together with Isa, back then, during her first week in Moscow; the Metropol is not just a hotel, but an integral part of the history of the Soviet Union. When the Bolsheviks moved from St. Petersburg to Moscow because the front was getting menacingly close, there was hardly space in Moscow for the rapidly growing government apparatus, neither for offices nor for apartments, as Isa explained it to her, so the large hotels were requisitioned and declared *Houses of Soviets*. Over twenty buildings in total were repurposed in that manner. The Metropol became the *Second House of Soviets* – right after the Hotel National, where Lenin resided.

Charlotte recalls the trepidation that came over her when she first set foot on that multicolored marble floor. She recalls Isa tugging at her sleeve and making a bee-line for the glass elevator, which was guarded by a fat, uniformed lift operator with an enormous walrus mustache. Incomprehensibly, they even made it past the room service matron enthroned on the staircase landing and bearing the unreadable, ill-humored expression of all Soviet duty officers. Charlotte recalls the swaying glass doors, the endless corridors, their dignified expanse interrupted only by the chess tables over which mute adversaries sat hunched, oftentimes still surrounded by snooping observers.

In another wing, children romped about playing cops and robbers (or, who knows, Budyonny in the battle against the White Army). It was evident there were still long-term residents here. Indeed, Charlotte had also seen photographic portraits of famous guests in the vestibule: Bernard Shaw had been there, Henry Barbusse, too, the author of the famous biography of Stalin (which he didn't write), and others still whom they didn't immediately recognize in passing. It was there that Nikolai Bukharin had lived before moving into the Kremlin. The office of Sverdlov had been there, too, no less a person than the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Soviet, in essence the highest representative of the new state.

They succeeded in taking a cursory peek into that ostentatious restaurant where the first constitution of the Socialist Soviet Republics had been hashed out in 1918. All the important party figures had shown up here. And something else she'd noted: it was in that hall that the fabled José Raúl Capablanca had played against the legendary Emanuel Lasker in the First International Moscow Chess Tournament.

And now they're supposed to live here? Where the room must be paid in gold rubles and, as one can plainly gather from the display at reception, where it costs more per month than both their monthly salaries combined? Why not stick them in Hotel Soyuznaya? Or in Comintern-Hotel Lux, where Hilde lives with her family? A dump compared with this magnificent structure.

While making illegal courier trips for the OMS, they'd stayed in quite a few hotels around the world. And although none was as imposing as this one, Charlotte had by all means learned to move about in such buildings — abroad. But here? In the homeland of the workers? Even Wilhelm is uncertain. Are they supposed to carry their luggage upstairs themselves? Do they wave a bellhop over with a barely perceptible hand gesture, or do they make a friendly request for help?

The walrus mustache in uniform, Charlotte recognizes him right away, takes pity and carries their luggage to the lift — perhaps because he doesn't think Wilhelm capable of handling the big suitcases, perhaps also because these are bedecked with stickers from Paris, Berlin, and Stockholm and the man anticipates a tip? What game are they playing at here, who are they? Foreign tourists, as their counterfeit Swiss passports identify them? Or are they here employees of the Comintern, of whom adherence to the rules of communist ethics is expected? What do these people know about them?

Third floor. Wilhelm laboriously rummages out a ruble note that the lift operator, however, refuses to accept. The rest of the way they carry their suitcases themselves.

Wilhelm has to stop and put them down twice before they reach their room: 479. Charlotte commits the number to memory immediately.

The room is certainly twice as large as the tiny cell available to them at Point Two. There's a writing desk, an elegant dressing table. Two comfortable armchairs sit at a small table; they could eat here, were the preparation of food not forbidden, as they were informed at reception. Instead of a double bed, there are two individual single beds, which doesn't displease Charlotte. The window faces north. Not a sunny room, but nor is it dark. And the kicker: they have their own bathroom, a luxury they've long gone without.

Charlotte steps out onto the wraparound balcony. Leading away, straight ahead, *Neglinnaya Ulitsa*. Below, the broad *Teatralny Proezd*, teeming with life, even in October: Streetcar number one rattles by. Automobiles honk passengers out of their way. Droshky drivers bellow. On the gigantic construction site in front of the Bolshoi Theater, workers toil to fulfill the *Master Plan for the Reconstruction of the City of Moscow*.

To the right on the hill, the Lubyanka is visible. At first, she actually thought *Lubjanka* came from love – *lyubov*. In reality it is derived from the Russian word for

linden tree bast – *lub*. Isa explained it to her once. A place where bast was once traded. Today it's the name of the interrogation prison for the NKVD: the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs. The secret police.

And to the left, a few hundred meters away, the House of the Unions. The site of the trial. Ridiculous thought: that they'd intentionally been transferred here, to this room, so that they'd have the Lubyanka in their sightline to the right and to the left the building in which Alexander Emel was sentenced to death.

The first night. The noise from the street doesn't fade for a long time. Oddly enough, the heavy curtains cannot be shut completely. Every time an automobile drives past, a blaze of light skitters across the plaster rosette on the ceiling, causing the circular arrangement of golden stars around the light fixture to flash. Charlotte cannot help but think of that photograph, the famous one that shows her as a Christmas angel, at four years old, with a golden crown of stars on her head. For years it was on display in the shop window of Courtly Photographer Brach on Leipziger Strasse. Her mother bragged: That's my Lottchen!

Mother, how did the stars get in the picture? Her mother thought it right to answer her with: Those are the little angel stars that came down over you because back then you were good.

Emphasis on *back then*.

Oh yes, her mother did so love that photograph. Apart from that, her love accrued, unshared, to her older brother. He was coddled; for him they scrimped and saved. It was on his account that Lottchen had to sit in the maid's room on Sundays, mending strangers' clothes: *so that Carl-Gustav can go to university*. Yet she herself was permitted to attend just four grades of housekeeping school. Is that what the stars on the ceiling are supposed to remind her of?

There are sixteen, she recounts them twice. It's a shame it doesn't correspond: it was fourteen years ago that she saw Wilhelm for the first time. Sixteen accused?

She'd rather not believe that. She closes her eyes. She hears Wilhelm breathing. Wilhelm isn't sleeping either, over in his bed.

She turns onto her other side. Every so often a blaze of light flits across her closed eyelids. More and more seldom. Bit by bit the street falls silent. No more streetcars, no more shouting.

Only at half past three do a few cars cruise down again from the Lubyanka, past the hotel. But by then Charlotte is fast asleep.

4 Ethics

– *Vasiliy Vasilievich* -

Yes, it's an honor to have gotten a seat on the Mausoleum stage on November 7, but in fact it's horrible. There's a wind blowing up here, one's feet ache with cold after a half hour, but even so, one cannot attend the celebration of the Revolution in felt boots.

To make matters worse, he has a feeling he'll soon need to use the toilet, but it's impossible to sneak away from the Mausoleum stage unnoticed. He wonders how the others manage: Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov. Yezhov, that nasty little midget who looks puny even next to Stalin. Old Kalinin. Khrushchev, are his feet really that big? Or is it just his boots? Probably bundled them up with two pairs of footwraps. Smarter than he looks, that oafish peasant.

Vasiliy Vasilievich wiggles his toes. What's especially excruciating are the pinky toes, which are touching the cold boot leather. Vasiliy Vasilievich tries to think of something else.

What is Vasiliy Vasilievich thinking about?

He's of course thinking about his rendezvous. He thinks of a pale face, of black locks. Her name is Wadwiga. He tries to imagine how it will go. He's thought up words to say, bad words, dirty words. He hears Wadwiga saying them with that Polish accent of hers. The stupid thing is that her face keeps growing hazy in his mind's eye, that the longer his imaginings occupy him, the more her face begins to resemble the beautiful German woman's.

She wouldn't have been bad, the German. It's just that her husband hasn't been arrested yet, unfortunately — he inquired with Polyachek. It concerns some

Comintern people suspended from service because they were familiar with that Lure. He recalls: Professor of Ancient Somethingorother.

Should he summon her, the beautiful German? Under what pretense?

No, that's not how it works. The woman has to come. The husband has to be in custody. The case must be on his desk, not with Polyachek. And even then, all this isn't as simple as one might imagine. Yagoda allegedly had the women rounded up from the street, but how's that supposed to happen? Wonder what his wife had to say about that. Ida Averbakh, she wasn't just anyone to be treated like that. The niece of Sverdlov! A prosecutor! Even wrote books about our terrific reeducation camps.

Well, now she can study the reeducation camps from the inside ... Perhaps she was involved in all that dirty business? Someone can't just have three thousand pornographic photos in his possession without his wife noticing. Allegedly he even collected women's underwear. Women's underwear! If Annushka were to find even just a single pair of panties on him ...

It's astonishing how long Stalin can salute. Maybe he practices? Thank god there's no need to wave the entire time in the second row. There are indeed advantages to not being right up front, because that wouldn't spare you either.

Last year, that's where Bukharin was standing. Stalin had him specially brought up onto the stage after seeing that Bukharin hadn't been assigned a spot. And now he's sitting in his cell and philosophizing. Writing letters to Stalin, brownnosing, as if that could be of any use.

No, he'd rather not imagine what'd happen if Annushka were to catch him. He mustn't make any mistakes. Everything has to be watertight, precise planning ... Problem is, he's virtually always under observation. He shuttles between the hotel, his office, and the court, all within a radius of a few hundred meters. Everyone sees him, everyone knows him. Every person who marches into his office is logged. During office hours, the building is full of staff. And at night, when the building is

empty, when he is the only person there, the guards let no one in. Such are the security regulations he himself created. Were he to instruct the guards to make an exception for once and admit a particular woman, then by morning it'd have spread around the whole security detail. The day after, the chauffeur would know about it. And a week later so would Annushka ...

Walled in. Surrounded by one's own people. Vasiliy Vasilievich sniffs. It's not easy being the Chairman of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR.

Here come the tanks, the highlight of the event. T-70 is the name of the newest development, a light tank. We're not going to win a war with that, Vasiliy Vasilievich thinks. But Stalin is clapping, and everyone starts applauding: Molotov, Kaganovich, Yezhov, Kalinin, Mikoyan, Khrushchev, and finally Budyonny, too. Yes, even Budyonny, the great hero. Even though he might be the only person in Russia Stalin couldn't simply have arrested. Or is he? After all, they even managed to arrest Tukhachevsky. No one would've seen that coming. Yesterday the hero of the nation, today a traitor. Anything goes. And the people believe it. That is — Ulrikhism.

Vasiliy Vasilievich is forced to recall that night: the night of his epiphany. Or was it morning already? It was cold. Cold and clear. And everything seemed so fantastic, so auspicious ... odd, how quickly that feeling evaporated. Hightailed out. How quickly life took hold of him again, the daily grind, his work. And that awful holiday in Crimea ...

Sometimes he can still feel an echo of that exhilaration. But then there are also times when he can't even comprehend what that epiphany actually consisted of. That people believe what they want to believe — now that really is no great secret. Or is it? How stupid are people? How stupid are those who'll believe in anything? And how stupid are those who don't even notice they believe in it?

Finally, the tanks are gone, the parade is over. Stalin turns around, rubs his hands together, and stamps his feet in place like a dancing bear. One never quite knows whether to laugh; apparently Stalin is in a good mood. But suddenly he turns to everyone, saying in a strident tone of voice: Comrades, we made a mistake! He looks around, his gaze wandering from one person to the next, coming to rest on Budyonny.

We should have carried out the Revolution in the summertime, Stalin says.

And after a second of shock, everyone laughs. Even Vasiliy Vasilievich laughs. Even Stalin himself laughs at his joke.

Let's go, Stalin says. And to Voroshilov: I hope you turned up the heat!

They climb down off the platform, dispersing into the waiting automobiles. Off to lunch at Voroshilov's house — where he isn't invited, Vasiliy Vasilievich. Everyone is invited, just not him. Mercifully!

Vasiliy Vasilievich marches across Red Square, down to the Moscow River. From there he'll take a taxi. He keeps his head bowed, the shapka pushed down low onto his face ... things are supposed to be worst when Stalin has been drinking. Then fat Khrushchev has to dance the gopak. Or Stalin torments people with questions: How much does the Soviet Union weigh, he supposedly asked Yezhov. To hell with that, he'd rather use the time for a little jaunt.

Although it does rankle him a bit that once again he wasn't invited. Nor did he receive the Order of Lenin. Fuck the award, but somehow it's still unfair. He slaves and toils away: always, always some new, urgent campaigns. A German operation, a Polish operation. Polyachek told him that there's soon going to be a Latvian operation. But why? Is it Stalin's mistrust of everything non-Russian?

But Stalin doesn't trust the Russians either. And after all, he himself is a non-Russian. Vyshinsky is a Pole. Vasiliy Vasilievich is a Latvian. It's incomprehensible. This summer he had half the army leadership killed. Oh hell, almost all of them! And almost all of them Russian. Thousands of verdict,

everything within his purview, that of Vasiliy Vasilievich Ulrikh. Twice he had to push back the summer holiday he'd promised Annushka, and in the end, out of pure deference, he hadn't even brought along his butterfly equipment.

What is anyone supposed to do on holiday — without butterfly equipment? The worst vacation of his life. Even the war had been more fun ... a whopping two whole times this year he'd managed to go on the hunt, and when he'd finally gotten around to spreading the wings of the white-letter hairstreak with its doubled W on the postdiscal region, it crumbled on him. He could have cried.

One time he signed one hundred thirty-eight death sentences in two days. A hundred thirty-eight! To be sure, the troikas Yezhov recently deployed throughout the country manage more, outpacing one another in Stakhanovite manner. Reportedly there are some who've sentenced four hundred people in a day. For one thing, however, they work in threes, and if you divide four hundred by three, you get one hundred thirty-three; he's done the calculation. That'd be five fewer than his record. And besides, his cases have a certain weight to them: marshals, corps leaders, division commanders — in these cases one should at least thumb through the files.

Four hundred sentences in one day. Vasiliy Vasilievich tries to divide four hundred verdicts by twelve working hours. Let's say thirty-seven per hour, which means less than two minutes per sentence. No, that's just not respectable. [...]

There's the communal rooming house. Vasiliy Vasilievich walks past it slowly, on the opposite side of the road, to scout out the situation: a doorman, that he might've guessed. Vasiliy Vasilievich needs a few paces more to feel up for the rendezvous. Then he does an about-face and strides steadily toward the building,

concealing his limp. The doorman proves to be a doorwoman, one of those typical battle-axes on duty.

Vasiliy Vasilievich strikes a severe, official note: Citizen, is there an elevator here? The citizen seems unnerved at his showing up.

Comrade Officer, strictly speaking, you're not permitted to just ...

I'm asking you if there's an elevator here!

Yes, but it doesn't work.

Vasiliy Vasilievich climbs the stairs. Room 401, he presumes it's on the fourth level, but there are only three upper floors. He enters the long corridor. A neon-light flickers. There's clutter lying around everywhere, an old sewing machine, a broken chair, like at a junkyard.

Room 401, his heart is pounding, he tries to breathe calmly. Knocks. The Polish woman opens in a striped men's bathrobe.

I was already thinking you weren't going to come.

Does she sound disappointed or relieved? Vasiliy Vasilievich no longer recalls what he'd imagined when the woman told him she'd been working in the paper factory since her husband's arrest and had a room in a nearby boarding house. This is no room; it's a cell, at most two by three meters in area. Hideous, torn wallpaper. On the street-facing side, beneath the window, a lopsided little table. In spite of the time of day, the bare lightbulb on the ceiling is on. Vasiliy Vasilievich takes note of all this only peripherally, as a slovenly, dismal whole that spites him: Is this what he deserves?

Amazingly enough, there are two beds in the tiny room, each against a wall, to the left and to right. It turns out that Wadwiga does not live here by herself, but has a roommate who's gone out. She'll be back in about an hour and a half, the woman discloses, by then we have to be *finished*.

That word immediately bothers Vasiliy Vasilievich although he doesn't know why he should object to it. One and a half hours is enough time; he decides

not to let it get to him. He takes off his coat, tossing it onto the empty bed to the left. The woman draws the shabby curtains, switches on a night-table lamp, and turns out the overhead light, sitting down on the bed to the right.

You want to get straight to ... or would you like a vodka?

Vasiliy Vasilievich opts for the vodka, to get in the mood. He takes a seat and watches her pour the drink. In this storage closet, she also comes across as a cast-off. Like a discarded, damaged person. In his office she'd seemed beautiful to him. Not as pretty as the beautiful German woman, but still somehow in her grief full of character. Her eyes had luster, her face the pallid dignity of a statue. Here, though, she's simply just white, her skin seemingly flaccid from exhaustion. The bathrobe, which swallows her up, presumably belongs to her arrested husband. On her feet she's wearing glittery slippers with pink pompons, relics from a previous life.

They drink.

You've got a hole in your jacket, the woman says.

Vasiliy Vasilievich considers whether he ought to say something about a mugging, but decides against it. It happened when he got out of the taxi: I fell. He points to his knees, on them the dark outlines of patches of damp.

Oh god, the woman says. One more?

They drink one more. The woman is silent, biting nervously at her lips. Vasiliy Vasilievich also remains silent. What's there to say? He has her pour him a third vodka.

Well, I suppose we ought to ...

Yes of course, the woman agrees overhastily. She reaches for the lapels of the robe as if to take it off, then suddenly buries her face in her hands.

I'm so ashamed, she strains to say.

But before Vasiliy Vasilievich can make any reply, she apologizes, strips off her bathrobe, and lays herself on the bed, naked. Come, she says.

Vasiliy Vasilievich pulls off his boots, then his inform jacket, then the trousers. Deliberately, laboriously. He knows how he looks in long underwear. He already doesn't look like he wants to in uniform, but without his uniform it's just embarrassing. He considers whether to turn off the night-table lamp. Problem is, he does want to see.

He decides to avoid the very worst thing for the time being: nakedness. He lies beside the woman, Wadwiga, the name dawns on him again. Her eyes are damp with tears. Originally, he wanted to say dirty things to her, he remembers. He resolves to put that off. Later, Vasiliy Vasilievich decides, when they've gotten the blood flowing a bit.

He touches her breasts, strokes her belly. He begins to kiss her. But in point of fact he doesn't like to kiss. He'd rather get right down to it. It's just that his dick needs to be in the right frame of mind. He grabs between the woman's legs in the hope that something in him will stir if he does ... The woman willingly spreads her thighs, but this gesture just puts him under more pressure. Under pressure it's certainly not going to work. He grinds on her, fiddles with her sex a bit, but that doesn't get him any further. Her labia feel like ... like blintzes, Vasiliy Vasilievich thinks.

Come on, get to it, the woman says.

Say something dirty, Vasiliy Vasilievich commands.

What should I say?

Vasiliy Vasilievich prompts her, the woman repeats it without hesitation, without shame. Vasiliy Vasilievich is at his wit's end. Should he order her to feel ashamed?

He lets go of her and sits up.

What's the matter? the woman wants to know. You wanted to have me, now you've got me. I've done my part. Here I am, take me!

Again she says the dirty phrase Vasiliy Vasilievich recited to her, but it sounds laughable, awkward.

Stop it, Vasiliy Vasilievich says.

He rises, puts his uniform back on, loops his belt around, pulling it two holes too tight.

What's going to happen to my husband?

I'll do what I can, Vasiliy Vasilievich says.

The woman clutches at his hand: You mustn't convict him, my husband is innocent. You mustn't do that!

I'll take a very close look at the case, Vasiliy Vasilievich says. He tries to pull free, but the woman hangs on him. Her hand clenches his with staggering force.

You have to promise me!

I promise, Vasiliy Vasilievich says.

The woman releases him. Grabbing his coat, Vasiliy Vasilievich storms out of the room, half insensate, the lurid anguish of humiliation on his face.

He has the doorwoman call a taxi for him. Now he stands and waits. Snow falls, a cold flake touching the skin on his face every now and again. Vasiliy Vasilievich wanders back and forth, trying to think straight, experiencing once more the terrible moments of his disgrace. Heat keeps flushing into his face. He has a go at little excuses: the room, the situation. The impassiveness with which the woman repeated the depraved words. Perhaps, the thought occurs to him, because she, as a Pole, doesn't sense the depravity of the Russian words at all?

It doesn't help much. No matter which way you look at it, she became witness to his weakness. A witness to his fat paunch, to his long underwear, to his impotence.

The taxi arrives. Hotel Metropol, Vasiliy Vasilievich commands, but changes his mind straightaway. He can't let Anna see him in this condition, desolate inside and out. Take me to the *Street of the 25th of October*, number twenty-three.

Say no more, the driver replies.

What does he mean with *Say no more*? Vasiliy Vasilievich's wary eyes wander to the rearview mirror, but the driver is looking straight ahead, doing his job, not badgering him with any of his own concerns. Vasiliy Vasilievich is relieved, even grateful. Grateful that someone doesn't want anything from him for once.

He hands the driver an excessive tip.

So it's come to this, Vasiliy Vasilievich thinks while entering the building of the Military Collegium. Now he's giving money to people so that they don't pester him.

In his office he strips off his uniform, tossing it in a clump into the closet, and dons his backup uniform. Luckily, he also deposited one here, with service ribbons even. He'll discard the old uniform and order a new one, the trousers are too tight on him anyhow, and after all he's due a new uniform every year.

He walks into the bathroom, scrutinizing himself in the mirror. No sign of anything from looking at him, Vasiliy Vasilievich finds. He mislaid the medal, but another can be procured ... Gradually, he comes around. The familiar surrounds help. He returns to his office, takes a seat at his desk in the chair his butt knows by heart. From here, from the center of his life, what happened to him a half hour earlier in the communal boarding house seems to him less appalling. More distant, less real. Only his promise bugs him. Although it was nearly extortion. And what did he actually promise? He promised to take a close look at the matter again, nothing more.

Paging through the papers on his desk, Vasiliy Vasilievich retrieves the Woinakowski file, from which for some inexplicable reason the passport photo is missing. Treason against the fatherland, espionage, counterrevolutionary propaganda, the whole nine yards. Paragraphs 58.1, 58.3, 58.6 ... including confession, a hopeless case. Even if it'd happened this afternoon, Vasiliy Vasilievich thinks, he wouldn't have been able to do anything for the man.

In that regard, to some extent, it's good that nothing happened. Essentially, if he's honest, he couldn't even have produced the quid pro quo. Others do it: make promises about things that they can't keep. But isn't that a bit tacky? Unscrupulous?

Vasiliy Vasilievich stares at the file of Stanisław Woinakowski, or more precisely, he stares just past it into the void, at some point in space, while the most agonizing minutes of the afternoon run through his mind again — grinding against her skin, the stupid underwear in between, her labia feeling like blintzes, his futile futzing and kicking about, altogether hopeless, knowing basically from the first moment on: he can't do it ...

But that needn't embarrass him. He can't do something like that. It would be tacky, unscrupulous. And that he can't do it, for all intents and purposes, bespeaks the fact the he, Vasiliy Vasilievich, is not tacky and unscrupulous. Others might do such a thing, others might avail themselves in this way, but he can't. Yes, perhaps he's weak. But isn't his weakness an expression of a certain, let's just call it what it is: ethics?

He confirms the sentence with his signature: *Death by firing squad.*

Satisfied by his own incorruptibility, he closes the file and starts on the next one, quite automatically: Laima Zeraus. Alias Hilde Tal. From Latvia, like him. Somehow he vaguely remembers. Wasn't that the butcher's daughter? Or did she work in the meat factory? A mannish woman. Young, big mouth. What does she know about him? What could she know? Vasiliy Vasilievich doesn't like people

who might know something about him. Especially not those who might know that he studied at the Polytechnical Institute to become a businessman, not a lawyer. Yet the woman in the passport photo bears hardly any resemblance at all to the Laima Zeraus he knows. She's more a plump, soft woman. Is he getting her mixed up?

He looks at the indictment: Paragraph 58.5, 58.6. No confession. But statements from Abramov-Mirov, Melnikov, and several other people he doesn't know. With women he normally opts for at most ten years in prison, but why is that? Isn't equality the law of the land in the Soviet Union?

Death by firing squad, Vasiliy Vasilievich rules. He affixes his signature below the sentence, takes up the next file ... but then he recalls it's a holiday today. And here he is again, toiling away. While the others are lapping up hazelhen and chugging Champagne at Voroshilov's. Somehow it does offend him that he wasn't invited after all.