

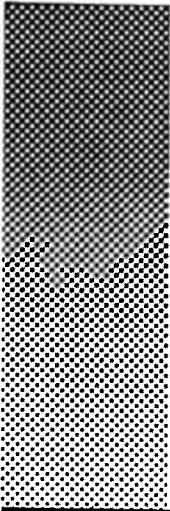
**EDWARD
LIMONOV**

**IT'S ME,
EDDIE**

A FICTIONAL MEMOIR TRANSLATED
FROM THE RUSSIAN BY S. L. CAMPBELL



RANDOM HOUSE NEW YORK



THE HOTEL WINSLOW AND ITS DENIZENS

If you're walking past the corner of Madison Avenue and Fifty-fifth Street between one and three in the afternoon, take the trouble to tip back your head and look up—at the unwashed windows of the black Hotel Winslow. There on the topmost, sixteenth floor, on the center-most of the hotel's three balconies, I sit half naked. Usually I am eating shchi and at the same time working on my tan, I'm a great sun lover. Shchi, or sauerkraut soup, is my usual fare; I eat pot after pot of it, day after day, and eat almost nothing else. The spoon I eat the shchi with is wooden and was brought from Russia. It is decorated with flowers of scarlet, gold, and black.

The surrounding office buildings gawk at me with their smoky glass walls, with the thousand eyes of the clerks, secretaries, and managers. A nearly, sometimes entirely naked man, eating shchi from a pot. They don't know it's shchi, though. What they see is that every other day, on a hot plate there on the balcony, a man cooks a huge steaming pot of something barbaric. At one time I also ate chicken, but then I stopped. There are five advantages to shchi: (1) It's very cheap, two or three dollars a pot, and a pot is enough for two days! (2) It doesn't spoil out of the refrigerator, even in very hot weather. (3) It's quick to make, only an hour and a half. (4) It can and should be eaten cold. (5) There's no better food for summer, because it's tart.

I choke and gobble, naked on the balcony. I'm not ashamed before those unknown people in the offices or their eyes. Sometimes I also have

with me, hanging on a nail driven into the window frame, a small green battery transistor given to me by Alyoshka Slavkov, a poet who plans to become a Jesuit. I enliven the taking of shchi with music. My preference is a Spanish station. I'm not inhibited. I am often to be found bare-assed in my shallow little room, my member pale against the background of the rest of my body, and I do not give a damn whether they see me or don't, the clerks, secretaries, and managers. I'd rather they did see me. They're probably used to me by now, and perhaps they miss me on days when I don't crawl out on my balcony. I suppose they call me "that crazy across the way."

My little room is four paces long and three paces wide. On the walls, covering the marks left by previous occupants, there hang: a large portrait of Mao Tse-tung, an object of horror to all the people who drop by to see me; a portrait of Patricia Hearst; my own photograph against a background of icons and a brick wall, with me holding a thick volume, perhaps a dictionary or a Bible, and wearing a 114-patch blazer tailored by me, Limonov, monster out of the past; a portrait of André Breton, founder of the surrealist school, which portrait I have carried with me for many years, and which André Breton is usually unknown to those who come to see me; a call to support gay rights; other posters, among them one for Workers Party candidates; paintings by my friend the artist Khachaturian; numerous lesser papers. At the head of my bed is the poster "For Your Freedom and Ours," left from a demonstration in front of the *New York Times*. Completing the wall decor are two shelves of books. Mainly poetry.

I think it's clear to you by now what a character I am, even though I forgot to introduce myself. I started running on without announcing who I was; I forgot. Overjoyed at the opportunity to drown you in my voice at last, I got carried away and never announced whose voice it was. My fault, forgive me, we'll straighten it out right now.

I am on welfare. I live at your expense, you pay taxes and I don't do a fucking thing. Twice a month I go to the clean, spacious welfare office at 1515 Broadway and receive my checks. I consider myself to be scum, the dregs of society, I have no shame or conscience, therefore my conscience doesn't bother me and I don't plan to look for work, I want to receive your money to the end of my days. And my name is Edichka, "Eddie-baby."

And you, gentlemen, can figure you're getting off cheap. Early in the

morning you crawl out of your warm beds and hurry—some by car, some by subway or bus—to work. I hate work. I gobble my shchi, drink, sometimes drink myself into oblivion, seek adventure in dark city blocks; I have a magnificent, expensive white suit and an exquisite nervous system; I wince at your belly laugh in the movie theater and wrinkle my nose.

You don't like me? You don't want to pay? It's precious little—\$278 a month. You don't want to pay. Then why the fuck did you invite me, entice me here from Russia, along with a horde of Jews? Present your complaints to your own propaganda, it's too effective. That's what's emptying your pockets, not I.

Who was I over there? What's the difference, what would it change? I hate the past, as I always have, in the name of the present. Well, I was a poet, if you must know, a poet was I, an unofficial, underground poet. That's over forever, and now I am one of yours, I am scum, I'm the one to whom you feed shchi and rotten cheap California wine—\$3.59 a gallon—and yet I scorn you. Not all of you, but many. Because you lead dull lives, sell yourselves into the slavery of work, because of your vulgar plaid pants, because you make money and have never seen the world. You're shit!

I've gone a little too far, lost my temper, forgive me. But objectivity is not among my attributes; besides, the weather is fucking lousy today, it's drizzling, New York is gray and boring—empty weekend days, I have nowhere to go. Perhaps this is why I switched out of my usual mode and started calling you names. I apologize. Go on living for now, and pray God to keep me from mastering correct English as long as possible.

The Hotel Winslow is a gloomy black sixteen-story building, probably the blackest on Madison Avenue. A sign running from the top to the bottom of the façade proclaims WINSLO—the letter o fell out. When? Perhaps fifty years ago. I moved into the hotel by chance, in March, after my tragedy, my wife Elena had left me. Exhausted, footsore, and bloody from wandering around New York spending each night in a new spot, sometimes on the street, I was finally picked up by a former dissident and former groom at the Moscow race track, the very first recipient of the Welfare Prize (he prides himself on having been the first Russian to master welfare), stout, slovenly, wheezing Alyoshka Shneerson, my Savior, who led me by the hand to the Welfare Center on Thirty-first Street, and inside of a day I received emergency aid, which

has dropped me to the bottom of life, made me a man scorned and without rights—but fuck your rights, I don't have to earn my own board and room, and I'm free to write my poems, which are not fucking needed, either here in your America or there in the USSR.

So then how did I end up at the Winslow?

Shncerson's friend Edik Brutt lived at the Winslow, and that was where I came to live too, three doors down from him. The sixteenth floor consists entirely of cubicles, as do many other floors. When I meet people and mention where I live they look at me with respect. Few realize that such a neighborhood still has a dirty old hotel populated by poor old men and women and lonely Jews from Russia, where scarcely half the rooms have a shower or toilet.

Misfortune and failure hover invisibly over our hotel. During the time I have lived here two older women have thrown themselves out the window. One of them, a Frenchwoman I was told, with a face that still preserved traces of beauty, had always paced the corridor inconsolably; she threw herself from her fourteenth-floor window into the courtyard, the light-well. In addition to these two victims God very recently took the proprietress, or rather the mother of the proprietor, who is a huge, elephantine Jew in a yarmulke, I met him once at a party given by my American girl friend Roseanne. The proprietor's mother, like all old women, loved to give orders at the hotel, although the proprietor of our dirty little establishment owns forty-five other buildings in New York. Why she enjoyed hanging around all day and pointing out things for the hotel employees to do I don't know. Perhaps she was a sadist. Recently she disappeared. They found her later that day, a crumpled and mutilated corpse in the elevator shaft. The devil lives alongside us. Having seen a lot of films about exorcists, I am beginning to think it's the devil. From my window I can see the St. Regis Sheraton. I think about that hotel with envy. And, without prospect, dream of moving there if I get rich.

We Russians are treated by the hotel the way blacks were treated before Emancipation. Our sheets are changed much less often than the Americans', the carpet on our floor hasn't been cleaned once the whole time I've lived here, it's horrifyingly dirty and dusty. Sometimes an American from across the hall, an old hack who is always pounding his typewriter, comes out in his underpants, takes a broom, and sweeps the carpet vigorously as a form of calisthenics. I keep wanting to tell him

not to do it, since he only raises the dust and the carpet stays just as dirty, but I hate to deprive him of the exercise. Sometimes when I get drunk I think the American is an FBI agent assigned to watch me.

They give us the oldest sheets and towels, I clean my own toilet. In brief, we rate at the very bottom.

The hotel staff, I think, considers us useless freeloaders who have come to America—land of honest laborers with crewcuts—to eat them out of house and home. I know all about this. Everyone bitched about parasites in the USSR too, bullshitted about how you had to be useful to society. In Russia the people who bitched were the ones who worked least. I've been a writer for ten years now. It's not my fault that neither state needs my labor. I do my work—where's my money? Both states bullshit about the justice of their systems, but where's my money?

The hotel manager cannot stand me. A benighted lady in glasses, with the Russo-Polish name of Rogoff, she accepted me into the hotel under Edik Brutt's sponsorship. Like shit I needed his sponsorship, when there were plenty of empty rooms in the hotel, God knows who would live in cubicles like these. Mrs. Rogoff has trouble finding fault with me, but she very much wants to. Sometimes she gets a chance. Thus, in the early months I paid for my room twice a month, but after a while she suddenly demanded that I pay a month in advance. Technically she was right, but it was much more convenient for me to pay twice a month, on the days when I got my welfare check. I told her so. "But you can buy white suits and drink champagne, you do have money for that," she said.

I kept trying to think what champagne, what kind of champagne did she have in mind. Sometimes I drank California champagne, most often I did it with my friend Kirill, a young fellow from Leningrad, but how could she know that? We usually drank the champagne in Central Park. Only somewhat later did I recall that when planning for the birthday of my old friend, the artist Khachaturian—the one whose paintings hang in my cubicle—I really had bought a \$10 bottle of Soviet champagne and put it in the refrigerator, so that I could take it to the celebration that night. Mrs. Rogoff must have personally checked my refrigerator every day, or else this was done on her instructions by the maid who cleaned (did not clean) my room. "And you're on welfare," Mrs. Rogoff said. "Poor America!" she exclaimed passionately. "I'm the one who's poor, not America," I replied.

The reasons for her hostility to me became fully clear only later.

When she took me into the hotel she thought I was a Jew. Then when she got a good look at my chipped blue enamel cross, my only property and adornment, she realized I was not a Jew. A certain Marat Bagrov, formerly of Moscow television, who was still living at the Winslow then, told me Mrs. Rogoff had complained to him about Edik Brutt: He had deceived her and brought in a Russian. Thus, gentlemen, I know firsthand what discrimination is. I'm kidding—the Jews in our hotel live no better than I do. Far more than the fact that I'm not a Jew, I think, Mrs. Rogoff dislikes the fact that I don't look unhappy. Only one thing is required of me—to look unhappy, know my place, and not go around wearing first one suit and then another in sight of astonished spectators. I think she would take great pleasure in looking at me if I were dirty, hunchbacked, and old. It would comfort her. But a welfare recipient in lace shirts and white vests! In the summer, however, I wore white slacks, wooden platform sandals, and a little close-fitting shirt—the absolute minimum. This, too, irritated Mrs. Rogoff. Encountering me once in the elevator she said to me, staring with suspicion at my sandals and bare tanned feet, "You . . . like . . . heeppy. Rahssian heeppy," she added without a smile.

"Nyet," I said.

"Da, da," she said firmly.

The rest of the hotel staff treat me passably. The only good relationship I have is with a Japanese, or maybe he's Chinese, I can't tell, but he always smiles at me. I also say hello to an Indian in a turban, he too is attractive in my eyes. All the rest, in varying degrees, have wronged me, and I talk to them only if I am paying a bill or asking for a letter or phone message.

That is how I live. The days roll by one after another; opposite the hotel, on Madison, a whole block of buildings has been almost completely demolished, and an American skyscraper is about to go up. Some of the Jews and half Jews and fake Jews have moved out of the hotel, others have come in their stead. Like the blacks in their Harlem, they find support in communal living; in the evening they pour out on the street and sit by the hotel in the window bays, some swig from bottles in paper bags; they talk about life. If it's cold they gather in the lobby, occupying all the benches, and then the lobby is filled with the buzz and stir of voices. The hotel administration struggles against the communal habits of Soviet émigrés, their predilection for gypsy campfires, but

without success. It's impossible to force them not to gather, not to sit in front of the hotel. And although their rustic habit of sitting around must scare off potential victims who might suddenly wander into the hotel, the administration seems to have given up on them—what can you do.

I have very few dealings with them. I never stop and visit, confining myself to the words "Good evening!" or "Hi, everybody!" This doesn't mean I think ill of them. But in my lifetime of wandering I have seen such a variety of Russians and Russian Jews—in my view they're one and the same—that they no longer interest me. At times the "Russian" shows through more plainly in Jews than in real Russians.

So I don't stop to visit with them in front of the hotel, I go to my room. What would we talk about—about their misfortunes, about how tired they are, working as cab drivers or whatever. Recently I gave them a "Hi, everybody!" and walked past them, out into New York. Some new fellow, a Georgian Jew by his appearance, or more likely an ethnic Georgian who had masqueraded as a Jew in order to emigrate, shouted after me, "Hey, are you Russian too?"

"By now I've forgotten what I really am," I said, without stopping.

On my way back about two hours later, I passed them again, this time coming in from New York. The same mustachioed, swarthy fellow spotted me and said with an aggrieved air, "Hey, did you get rich or what, that you don't want to stop and talk?" This struck me funny, I had to laugh, but even so I didn't stop, to avoid getting acquainted. I have too many Russian acquaintances as it is. When you yourself are in a lousy fucking situation, you don't much feel like having unfortunate friends and acquaintances. And almost all Russians bear the imprint of misfortune.

You can recognize them from the back, by a sort of anguished depression in their posture. Although I hardly associate with them, I always recognize them in the elevator. Depression is their distinguishing mark. Between the first and the sixteenth floors they manage to start a conversation with you, inquire whether the new émigrés, one and all, will be given American citizenship in honor of the American Bicentennial; perhaps they will ask you to compose a petition to the President in this connection. What the fuck do they want with citizenship? They themselves don't know.

Or the conversation may take the opposite tack:

"Did you hear? In October they're going to let us in!"

"Let us in where?" I asked.

"What do you mean, where? Russia. A pilot defected from the USSR in a fighter plane, now they're going to let us back, to compensate, understand? One defected, and they let two thousand back. Two thousand want to go back. And half the applicants begin by asking to be sent straight from the airplane to prison camp, they want to do time for their crime, for having left the Motherland. But aren't you planning to go back? If they took anybody it would be you. Didn't I hear that you had been published again in both *Pravda* and *Izvestia*?"

"Oh, that was a long time ago, back in June," I said. "They translated an excerpt from the *Times* of London, and even that got distorted. No, I'm not planning on it, what the fuck would I do there? And besides, I'd be ashamed to go back. They'd laugh. I'm not going, I'll never go back."

"You're still young," the man said. "Give it a try, maybe you'll make it here."

"But I'm going," he continued quietly. "I had big ideas over there, you know, I thought much too highly of myself, but when I got here I saw there wasn't a thing I could do. I want peace. Somewhere south of Moscow, a little cabin in the Tula region; catch a few fish, do some hunting, get myself a job teaching in the village school. This is hell," he said. "New York is a city for madmen. I'm going back, I've been knocking around here long enough. They've got no fucking freedom here, just try and say anything bold at work. No fuss, no muss, but you're out on your ear."

He had worked various places, mainly washing dishes. He is getting unemployment, \$47 a week. He lives on the West Side in the Eighties, and had come to the hotel to see a friend.

"Do you play chess?" he asked as we said good-bye.

"Can't stand it," I replied.

"Do you drink vodka?"

"That I do," I said, "but not very often anymore."

"You can't drink here," he complained. "In Leningrad, if you had seven hundred grams with a nice snack, you'd be flying around town like you had wings, you'd be on top of the world. Drink here and it just deadens you, or worse. Drop in," he said, "I'll treat you to borscht."

In contrast to me, he makes borscht, using special beets of some sort.

They are always complaining that you can't drink here. You can, but it's not the same, the liquor depresses you—I'm thinking of quitting soon.

I used to work for the newspaper *Russkoe Delo* here in New York, and at that time I was interested in the problems of "the emigration." After my article entitled "Disillusionment," they fired me from the paper, away from temptation. My family was breaking up; my love, which I had considered a Great Love, was in its death throes; I myself was barely alive. All these events were crowned by the bloody twenty-second of February, my veins slashed in the doorway of the fashionable Zoli model agency, where Elena was living at the time, and then a week of life as a bum in downtown Manhattan. When I found myself at the hotel, however, or rather when I woke up there, I suddenly saw that my bad reputation had not died, people were phoning and coming to see me, still firm in their Soviet habit of believing that a journalist could help them. "Come now, folks, I'm no journalist—without a newspaper, without friends or connections." I made every possible effort to wriggle out of these meetings, I told people I couldn't even help myself, but there were still some meetings that I did not succeed in avoiding. Thus, for example, I had to meet with "Uncle Sasha," my acquaintances insisted on it. "You must help him, he's an old man, just talk to him and he'll feel better."

I went to see him in his room. It looked as if he lived with a dog. I glanced around for the dog, but there was none.

"I guess you had a dog?" I asked him.

"No, never," he said, frightened. "You've got me mixed up with someone else."

Mixed up, indeed. Bones, dry biscuits, crusts, food scraps lay on the floor in a solid hard layer, like pebbles on the seashore. The same layer of petrified leftovers lay on the table, the dresser, the windowsill, all horizontal surfaces, even the chair seats. He was an ordinary, plump, pathetic old man with a wrinkled face. I knew that all his life he had written about the sea and sailors. His sea stories had been published in *Around the World* and other Soviet magazines.

"I've been wanting to meet with you," he said, sighing. "My situation is desperate, I don't know what to do—I miss my wife so much. She's Russian." He indicated a photograph framed under glass; a tired woman gazed out at me.

"Whatever made me come here?" he went on. "I'm not up to learn-

ing the language. I live very badly. I was on welfare, two hundred and eighty dollars a month, then I reached pension age and they gave me a pension, only two hundred and eighteen dollars. I received two checks, and as an honest man I went to my Welfare Center and told them, 'Here are the two checks, I don't want the pension, I want welfare. My room costs a hundred and thirty dollars a month, that leaves me only eighty-eight a month for food, I can't get by on that, I'll die of hunger, I have a bad stomach.' I went there in good faith, told them, returned the check. They said, 'There's nothing we can do. By law you have to receive a pension.' He was practically weeping.

"Why did you come here?" I asked maliciously.

"I always wrote about the sea, you know. The minute a ship came in, I went right down to the ship. The sailors loved me. They told me about all the countries. I wanted to see them. What am I to do?" He glanced into my eyes. "I want to go back to my wife, she's so good." He wept.

"Go to the Soviet embassy in Washington," I told him. "Maybe they'll let you back. But it's impossible to say. Beg, weep. You haven't written anything against them here, have you?"

"No," he said, "just this story about the sea, it's coming out soon in an English-language magazine, but not anti-Soviet, it's about the sea. Listen here, they wouldn't put me away, would they?" he said, taking me by the sleeve.

"Listen, why would they put you away . . ."

Who the fuck needed him, I wanted to add, and other caustic remarks, but I restrained myself. I had no pity for him. I sat before him on his dirty chair, from which he had wiped the crumbs and dust with his hand. He sat on the bed; his old feet in their blue slippers stuck up in front of me. I found him distasteful—a slovenly, silly old man. I was a man of another generation, and although I myself often sobbed into my own pillow, I wouldn't have given a shit about the emigration if it hadn't been for Elena. The murder of love, a world without love, was terrible to me. But I sat before him thin, mean, and tanned, in jeans and a close-fitting jacket, my little thighs curving out as I sat—a bundle of malice. I might wish for him to become like me and exchange his fears for my malicious horrors, but he could not be like me.

"You think they'll let me in?" he said ingratiatingly.

I was sure they would not, but I had to comfort him. I knew nothing

about him except what he himself had told me; he might not be so innocuous as he seemed in his present situation.

"I want to ask you," he said, seeing me get up from the chair, "not to tell anyone about our conversation. Please."

"I won't," I said. "You'll excuse me, but someone's expecting me."

The blue slippers moved with me beyond the door. In the elevator I heaved a sigh of relief. Motherfucking fool.

I told Levin about our conversation anyway. Out of mischief.

Outwardly David Levin resembles a spy or an *agent provocateur* from a Soviet popular film. I'm no master at portraits, the most distinctive thing about his physiognomy is his bald spot; only the sides of his head are edged with fuzz. I was not acquainted with him, but I had been told that he was saying filthy things about me behind my back. He's the greatest rumormonger, this Levin. It was Lenya Kosogor, from Volume II of the *Gulag*, who told me. I was so profoundly indifferent to the whole Russian emigration, old, new, and future, that all I did was laugh. But, to my surprise, when I moved into the hotel Levin stopped me one day and said reproachfully that I was arrogant and didn't want to converse with him. I said that I wasn't arrogant but I was in a hurry now, I would be back in a couple of hours and drop in to see him. I did.

For any Russian with the slightest degree of intelligence, no one else from Russia is an enigma. Thousands of signs show at once *what* this man is and *who* he is. Levin gives me the impression of a man who is about to burst into hysterics and start yelling. I know in advance what he'll yell. The next line will go something like this: "Fuck off, bug-eyes, what are you staring at? How would you like to have your peepers pushed out, you goddamn filthy oyster!" This line from the underworld embodies my whole impression of Levin. I don't know the details of his life, but I suspect that he may have done time in the USSR for criminal activity. Or maybe not.

Levin says of himself that he is a journalist. But the articles Levin has published in that same *Russkoe Delo* are full of shit—statements that in the USSR only KGB agents live in nice new houses, and other fables. Now he says he's a journalist from Moscow, but when I saw him briefly one time in Rome he said he was a journalist from Arkhangelsk. Everything he says about himself is ambiguous. He says, on one hand, that he lived very well in the USSR and when he went on assignment he

"flew on Central Committee planes"; on the other, that he suffered from anti-Semitism in the USSR. Now he lives exclusively on money that he gets from Jewish organizations or directly from the synagogue. Which is also welfare, in its way. Once he had an abdominal operation; I think he used his misfortune as a means to pump money from American Jews. I need him like a cunt needs a door. What could be interesting in a fifty-year-old man with bad health, living in a crappy hotel and writing a drama called *Adam and Eve*, which he bashfully read to me. I told him—also bashfully, I hated to offend even Levin—that this literary form was not congenial to me, and therefore I could not comment on his work. I couldn't tell him that his *Adam and Eve* was not a literary form but a form of the fucking craziness caused by Western life, which he, like all of us, had entered into when he arrived here. He's still bearing up, others go out of their minds.

In our first conversation Levin slung mud at the whole hotel, all its inhabitants, but it was plain that he felt lousy being alone, and from time to time he attached himself to someone. He attached himself to me too, took me with him to a concert at a synagogue, introduced me to a little Jewish woman who spoke Russian. It was the first time I had attended a service in a synagogue, and I sat through the whole service with interest and reverence, behaved decorously and attentively, whereas Levin jabbered incessantly with a little old lady. I might have entered that world, thanks to Levin, but it was boring to me; the Jewish family dinners to which I would have been invited did not suit my mood. I love gefilte fish and stuffed herring, but I am more drawn to stuffed explosives, to congresses and slogans, as you will presently see. Normality is boring to little Eddie; I shied away from it in Russia, and you won't lure me into a life of sleep and work here. Hell no.

Even after that, Levin came to see me several times. Although I had earnestly implanted in myself a love of my fellow man and believed that all unfortunates must be pitied, although Levin fitted my conception of the "unfortunate man" and I really was sorry for him despite his malice, even so, I had to break off my acquaintance with him. Everything he saw in my room and everything I told him (calculating in advance that he would take it all and multiply and inflate and distort) he managed to exaggerate hyperbolically and foolishly. The portrait of Mao Tse-tung on the wall became my joining the Chinese Party. What the Chinese Party might be I did not know, but I had to curtail the number of

Russians, and Levin fell to the curtailment, a poor malicious victim. I say hello to him and sometimes spend half a minute telling him lies. He doesn't believe me, but he listens, and then I go away. "Business," I say, "I've got things to do."

People look pathetic, uprooted from their places, without their accustomed surroundings, without their normal work, dropped to the bottom of life. Once I drove to Long Beach for a swim with the savage Jew Marat Bagrov. He's the man who contrived to hold a counterdemonstration against a demonstration on Fifth Avenue on behalf of the free exit of Jews from the USSR. He came out with the slogans "Stop demagoguery!" and "Help us here!" Well, we went to Long Beach. Marat Bagrov drove a car that was stolen from him the next day, and a former Soviet cycling champion named Nahum and I were the passengers. Our group was to visit two dishwashers who were working there at Long Beach in a home for senior citizens. With hardly a glance into the semibasement rooms where the dishwashers lived—one of them an ex-musician, the other an ex-wheeler-dealer, an expert in smoking fish—I climbed over the fence to the beach to avoid paying the two dollars.

Seagulls, the ocean, a salty fog, hangover. I lay for a long time alone, unaware what world I was in. Later Bagrov and Nahum came down.

"Fucking emigration!" The thirty-four-year-old ex-champion said it over and over. "When I first arrived in New York I went out to buy a newspaper, I bought *Russkoe Delo*, and there was your article. It hit me like a hammer. What have I done, I thought, why the fuck did I come here."

He talked and dug a hole in the sand. "Fucking emigration" was his constant refrain. He had already worked at several places. At his last job he had repaired bicycles; along with two other workers, a Puerto Rican and a black, he had organized a strike, demanding equal pay for their work. One of them was paid \$2.50 an hour, the second \$3.00, and the third \$3.50.

"The boss summoned the black, and when he came in, the boss said, 'Why aren't you working, these are working hours,'" Nahum said, still mechanically digging the hole. "The black told the boss he had a doctor's appointment, that was why he had left early today. Then he asked the Puerto Rican why he'd left work early. He got scared too and said he had to go to Social Security today. But I asked the boss why didn't he pay us all equally, when we did the same work . . ." Nahum

was becoming impassioned. "He fired the black, he said, 'You may go.' But I left on my own, I'm working as a welder now—I weld beds, these are very expensive, stylish beds. I weld once, then grind down the joints; if there aren't any holes or blisters, fine, if there are I weld them again and grind them down again. I come home and my hair is full of grit . . ."

Nahum lives on Broadway, on the West Side; they have a hotel there like ours, where they put Jews. I don't know what the rooms are like but the neighborhood is worse, much tougher.

"Are you fucking your black woman?" Bagrov asked him matter-of-factly.

"Not that one, not anymore," Nahum replied. "She got too brassy. She used to take a five, now it's seven-fifty. That wouldn't matter, but once she knocked at two in the morning, I let her in, 'Let's fuck,' she says. I say let's, but free. 'Free?' she says, 'no way.' So I say, 'I've only got a ten, that's all the money I have.' 'Give me the ten,' she says, 'I'll bring you the change tomorrow and give it to you free.' We fucked and she totally disappeared for a week. And I didn't have any more money. She came back a week later and demanded money in advance, and not a word about the change. 'Get your ass out of here,' I said. And she wails, 'Give me two dollars, I came up here to see you, the doorman opened the door for me and brought me up in the elevator, I promised him two dollars for letting me in.'"

"Did you give it to her?" Bagrov asked with interest.

"I did," Nahum said, "but I'll be damned if I'll get involved with her, she has a pimp."

"No, better not," Bagrov said.

"Fucking emigration!" Nahum said.

"We have to steal, rob, kill," I said. "Organize a Russian mafia."

"If I write them a letter," Bagrov said, not listening to me, "the guys back in the Soviet Union, they won't understand a fucking thing. I have this friend, a real sport, he's always dreamed of going to the Olympic games. I'm going to write him that I drove my car to the Montreal Olympics—he'll be so envious. What's more, I wasn't working, I went to Montreal on unemployment."

"You'll never explain it to him—that for all your car and your Montreal you can be up to your ears in shit here. It's impossible to explain," Nahum said. "Fucking emigration!"

"No, you can't explain. And if he came he wouldn't care about Montreal, he'd be sitting in shit too. As for the car, I paid a hundred and fifty for it. A shitbox."

When we finished our swim—they, grown men, turned somersaults in the waves like children, something I, little Eddie, could not stand for long—the sun was already setting and we were the last to leave the beach. We talked about how few people in America go in the water and swim. Most just sit on the beach, or go in up to their knees and splash, whereas in the USSR everyone tries to see who can swim farthest, and overzealous swimmers are fished out by the lifeboats and forced to swim ashore.

"That's the fundamental difference between the Russian character and the American. Maximalism," I said, laughing.

We walked to the dishwashers' house and had a feast in one of their rooms. A feast of two dishwashers, a welder, a man on unemployment, and a man on welfare. A few years ago, had we forgathered in the USSR, we would have been: a poet, a musician, a champion Soviet athlete, a millionaire (one of the dishwashers, Semyon, had had about a million in Russia), and a nationally known television journalist.

"The manager kept an eye on us all day today, he knew we were having company, that's why we couldn't filch as much food as usual," the dishwashers explained. We devoured pressed chicken, talked vivaciously, poured from a half-gallon bottle of whiskey—all in haste, it was already dark and we still had to drive to Manhattan.

The musician was working here to accumulate the money for a ticket to Germany; he wanted to try yet another variant, it might be better there. His violin stood in a corner, carefully wrapped in rags, on top of the case. Washing dishes was hardly contributing to the improvement of his violin technique. Actually, the musician was not entirely sure he wanted to go to Germany. He had a parallel desire to get himself a job as a sailor on a Liberian ship, and for another thing he'd like to go to California.

As a colorful portrayal of what awaited us in the future, one of the dishwashers' colleagues appeared—an old Ukrainian. He received \$66 cash a week for the same work. "He's meek, the boss is bleeding him white. Besides, he's already old, he can't work as fast as we can," the dishwashers said, right in front of the old man, not in the least ashamed. He smiled in embarrassment.

We left the hospitable dishwashers and, with the air temperature dropping all the time, set off for New York along the lovely American roads. We drove, raged, cursed, blustered, but soon we would part and each would wake alone with himself.

The Hotel Winslow. I moved in here, supposedly for a month, in order to regain my composure and look around; later on I planned to rent an apartment in the Village or a loft in SoHo. Now I find my own naïveté touching. A hundred and thirty—that's all I can pay. For that kind of money the only place I could move to is Avenue C or D. In this respect the Hotel Winslow is a godsend. At least it's central, a saving on transportation; I go everywhere on foot. As for its denizens, well, I don't have to associate with them.

We do have some cultured people in the hotel. Edik Brutt, for example, is a vegetarian and reads all the time, supplements his education. He reads Greek and Latin lyrics and Omar Khayyám, he reads Shakespeare's works and Chinese philosophy, in Russian of course. A kind, quiet little fellow with a mustache, Edik has an American friend, a tall man of about forty who knows many languages. Otherwise he resembles Edik—he does not consort with women, at the age of forty he lives with his mama. This American, by the name of Bant, often takes Edik somewhere to listen to the organ. Cultural entertainment. I wouldn't last five minutes. Edik likes it. I respect him.

Edik was a cameraman in Moscow, or an assistant cameraman. He lives quietly, feeds everyone who comes to see him, lends money—he'd give you his last dollar—and he's on welfare.

Another of our hotel's intellectuals, a tall, fair man of thirty-three, is the poet Zhenya Knikich. That's a typical Leningrad surname—refined. By training he is a philologist, he defended a dissertation on the topic "*Dostoevsky's Village of Stepanchikovo and Its Denizens*, from the Standpoint of Eccentricity." He cooks kidneys and sausages in his cubicle, which looks out on a dark light-well; on his bed sits the homely American girl who teaches him English; all over the walls there are pieces of paper with expressions written in English, like "I want to work." That statement does not fit the facts, Zhenya doesn't much want to work; at present he is trying to get on welfare. "I am a serious scholar," he tells me. He is, I think; why not? But he and I both understand that his profession as a serious scholar—an expert on Gogol and Dostoevsky, a teacher of aesthetics—is not fucking needed here. What's needed here

is serious dishwashers, people who will do the dirty work without any literary reflections. Literature here has its own mafia, art has its own mafia, any form of business has its own mafia.

The Russian emigration has its own mafiosi. Fair-haired Zhenya was unprepared for this, as was I. He worked at *Russkoe Delo*, as did I in my time, for one of the chief mafiosi of the Russian emigration, Moses Yakovlevich Borodatykh. Mafiosi will never let anyone else get at the feed trough. Fuck no. It's a question of bread, of meat and life, of women. We know all about this: try and break into the Soviet Writers' Union. They'll crush everything. Because it's a question of bread, meat, and cunt. A struggle to the death. For the cunts of the Elenas. It's no joke.

Sometimes I am seized with a cold anger. I look out of my little room at the high-rise walls of the neighboring buildings, at this great and terrible city, and I understand that this is all very serious. It's either the city or me. Either I become that pathetic old Ukrainian who visited my dishwasher friends at our feast—as humiliated and pathetic as we are, he is even more humiliated and pathetic—or else . . . "Or else" means "win." How? Who the fuck knows—by destroying the city, even. Why should I pity it? It doesn't pity me. Jointly with others, I'm not the only one like this. In any case, my corpse will never be carried out of the Hotel Winslow like a stupid board.

The terrible seriousness, the poignancy, of my position seizes me when I first wake up in the morning. I jump up, drink coffee, wash out of my head the sleepy snatches of pathetic Russian songs and poems and other fragments of a Russian delirium, and sit down to my papers—either my English or something I'm trying to write. I keep glancing out the window. Those buildings make my gorge rise. Cocksuckers! I've taken to swearing a lot here. I'll never make it in this system, I think with anguish, looking down the long and difficult road ahead. But I must give it a try.

The cheapest food, not always enough of it; dirty little rooms, wretched poor clothes, cold, vodka, nerves—my second wife went out of her mind. Ten years of that life in Russia, and now the whole thing over again. "Where's your motherfucking justice, world?" I feel like asking. I worked ten years there, day after day, wrote so many collections of poetry, so many poems and stories, I accomplished a lot, I was able to create in my books a well-defined image of the Russian man. And the

Russian people read me, they bought the eight thousand collections that I typed and distributed all those years, they knew them, recited them by heart.

But I saw one day that I would rise no higher there. Moscow was reading me, Leningrad was reading me, and my collections had found their way to a dozen other major cities, people accepted me, but the state did not. Try as I might with my primitive distribution methods, what I did would never reach the masses. My heart was bitter that for someone like Rozhdestvensky they ran off millions of copies, but they had not printed a single poem of mine. You can go fuck yourselves, I thought, you and your system. I haven't worked for you since I quit peddling books in 1964. I'll get the hell out of here with my beloved wife, I'll go to the other world. Writers breathe freer there, they say.

And so I came here. Now I see it makes no fucking difference, here or there. The same gangs in either sphere. But here I have something more to lose, because I am a Russian writer, I write in Russian words. And as a man, I found I had been spoiled by the praise of the underground, the attention of underground Moscow, of artistic Russia, where a poet is not what a poet is in New York. From time immemorial a poet in Russia has always been something of a spiritual leader. To make the acquaintance of a poet, for example, is a great honor there. Here a poet is shit, which is why even Joseph Brodsky is miserable here in your country. Once when he came to see me on Lexington Avenue he said, as he drank his vodka, "One has to have the hide of an elephant here in this country. I do, but you don't." There was anguish in these words, because Joseph Brodsky has succumbed to the system of this world, though he had not succumbed to the system of the other. I understood his misery. In Leningrad, after all, apart from his troubles, he had had tens of thousands of admirers, he would have been received with delight in any house on any evening, the beautiful Russian maidens, the Natashas and Tanyas, were all his—because he, a red-haired Jewish youth, was a Russian poet. The best place for a poet is Russia. There, even the authorities fear our kind. They have from time immemorial.

And other friends of mine, those who went to Israel, what nationalists they were! They emigrated expecting to find in Israel an application for their minds, talents, ideas; they believed it was their state. Like hell!

It is not their state. Israel does not need their ideas, their talent, their ability to think, not at all. Israel needs soldiers, just like the USSR—hup, two, and obey! You're a Jew, you must defend your country. But we're sick of defending your faded old banners, your values, which long ago ceased to be values; sick of defending what's "yours." We're tired of "yours," old men, we ourselves will soon be old men, we doubt that we should, that we must. You can all go fuck yourselves . . .

"We." Although I think of myself as separate, I keep returning to this concept "we." By now there are a great many of us here. And I must confess, we have among us quite a few madmen. This is normal.

There's a certain Lenya Chaplin who constantly makes the rounds of the émigrés. Properly he is not a Chaplin, he has a complicated Jewish surname, but back in Moscow he was in love with Chaplin's younger daughter *in absentia* and took himself a pseudonym in her honor. When said daughter got married, Lenya mourned, he tried to poison himself. I knew him in Moscow and once attended a birthday party of his where, besides me, there was only one other man, the seminormal philosopher Bondarenko, the ideologue of Russian fascism, stock boy in a liquor store. I was astounded by Lenya's narrow streetcar of a room. All its walls were papered over with the great men of our world, large and small, in several layers. There were Oswald and Kennedy, Mao and Nixon, Che Guevara and Hitler . . . Never have I seen a crazier room. Only the ceiling was free of great men. Some great heads were glued on top of others, the paper was layered as thick as my finger.

Now, after spending time in various American states—and, as evil tongues say, in several state mental hospitals—Lenya lives in New York on welfare. He makes peculiar use of public assistance. He sets aside the whole sum, about \$250. He plans to travel in the future, or maybe join the American army. He spends the night with friends and eats . . . what he takes from garbage cans on the street, first a slice of pizza, then some other filth. So doing, he invariably makes one and the same pronouncement: "Grain by grain, and the hen fills her belly."

This madman Lenya—who is nevertheless a cultured youth, he's read Nietzsche, and written some Buddhist parables about three elephants—is a relative of sorts. My second wife, Anna Rubinstein, had a niece who was Lenya's first woman. Lecherous Stella, who, in the expression of a longtime acquaintance of mine, had a cunt like Finland Station, fucked

the tall schizoid Lenya. My "relative" also lived in Israel for a while, before America.

Lenya is always sitting at somebody else's, chewing something. Sometimes he drops in on my neighbor Edik Brutt.

"Motherfucker," I say to him, "what are you doing, spreading rumors again? Always hanging around, you shitass! You ought to stay home, you big slob, write something, work," I say.

"How vulgar you've become, Limonov," says Lenya. Bearded, bald-pated, dressed in torn jeans, he is a little afraid of me. Even the shape of his head and the stoop of his tall figure testify that he has been mad since birth. I see no special sin or misfortune in this, I merely enjoy establishing the fact.

A completely different form of madness has taken hold in little Sasha Zelensky. This mustachioed prig is notorious among us for owing a gigantic amount in debts, for an émigré. He works nowhere, receives no public assistance, and lives exclusively on credit. On the wall of his studio, which he rents on none other than Fifty-eighth Street, for \$300 a month, is emblazoned the proud inscription: "World—I owe you money!"

Zelensky graduated from the Institute of International Relations in Moscow. His papa was a big wheel at *Krokodil*. When he first arrived in America Sasha worked as an economist in marine transportation; this was his profession, and since he knew English, they took him in his specialty. He made quite a decent salary, but naturally his madness stirred within him and demanded sacrifices, an incarnation. Sasha decided that he was a great photographer, although he had never taken pictures in the USSR. An emaciated man who looks like a cross between two Russian writers, Belinsky and Gogol, Sasha chose photography, I think, in the belief that there was easy money in this "chic" profession. Had he decided he was a photographer and then taken pictures, labored, striven, sought, that would have been all right; it would simply have been called fanaticism. But this is serious: he takes no pictures, knows how to do nothing, and has developed a frenetic business borrowing more and more money. New loans crawl over old . . . It's the only thing he knows how to do. How does he manage? I don't know. Maybe he puts on a yarmulke and goes to the synagogue. That's what many do . . .

How much does he owe? I don't know. Perhaps twenty thousand. He calls up people he has seen once in his life and asks for money, and is

very offended when they refuse him. It has been a colossally long time since he paid for his studio, I don't know why they haven't thrown him out by now. He lives on bread and water, thin as a skeleton, but for some reason he doesn't go to work. At one time he worked as a waiter at a coffee shop on Forty-third Street, but after a short time they threw him out.

He has a thin little voice, worn-down shoes, and holey jeans. He and Zhigulin, another boy photographer who lives downstairs, used to have the lousy habit of comforting themselves by loudly cussing out famous photographers: "Hiro? Shit. Avedon? An old hack . . ." The names flashed by. Zelensky and Zhigulin knew how to make masterpieces, but for some reason they didn't do it. Now they've piped down a bit.

At present Sasha Zelensky is waiting for his mummy, whom he dearly loves, to arrive from Moscow. The wild mood he was in a while ago, when Zhigulin said to me, "Mark my words, he's bound to hang himself"—he wouldn't let anyone in and sat locked in the eternal semidarkness of his ragged studio (all there was about him of the photographer was the studio)—that mood has passed. Soon his mummy will arrive, and perhaps mustachioed Sasha with the evil eye (there is something equine about his eye, always rolled back at you with such suspicion, he's always suspicious, Zelensky is) will force his mummy to work, while he himself devises his next project, a design for a ring, a project that he will carry around and propose to the jewelry stores. From time to time Zelensky comes to me—to a man who has done a great deal of tailoring in his life to earn his bread and butter—with the request that I make a designer shirt of his own design, which he painstakingly conceals. I tell him to buy the fabric and bring his design, I'll make it for him immediately. This has been dragging on for two years now, and he will never buy the material or bring the design because there is but one name for all his unfinished schemes—madness. Not the kind where people rattle the bars, yell, and spatter spittle. No, the quiet, apologetic, thin-voiced madness where they try to print color photographs, they conceive designs for rings or invent solar batteries or suddenly decide to devote themselves seriously to classical music. Man has no peace in this world. He is harassed on all sides and forced to make money. Why money? So that seedy down-at-heel Zelensky can turn into handsome Zelensky in a Rolls-Royce, with a beautiful smiling fair lady beside him. All beggars dream of fair ladies. I have already had my fair lady.