UNTRACEABLE

SERGEI LEBEDEV

TRANSLATED BY ANTONINA W. BOUIS



An Apollo Book

Homunculus (From the phial, to Wagner.)
Now, father! That was no joke. How are you?
Come: press me tenderly to your heart, too!
But not too hard, the glass may be too thin.
It's in the very nature of the thing:
For the natural the world has barely space:
What's artificial commands a narrow place.
(To Mephistopheles.)
But you, Rascal, my dear Cousin, are you
Here at the right moment? I thank you, too.
Good fortune's led you here to me:
Since I exist, I must be doing, you see.
I'd like to begin my work today:
You're skillful at shortening the way.

Faust Part 2, Goethe

CHAPTER 1

Vyrin had grown accustomed to the muted, prolonged ailments that accompanied the approach of old age. But he felt the aches and pains more acutely in summer than in any other season. They ripened and gathered strength by late August, the anniversary of his defection, tormenting his joints, vessels, and eyeballs—only to vanish with ease in early fall, when the heat abated and the barometer calmed down.

Maybe this was the death sentence given me in absentia, he joked to himself, his lips tasting the wormwood of death postponed.

"Or is my body taking its revenge?" he thought. "Revenge for the new face created by the plastic surgeon? The scars and birthmarks lasered away? Does it remember and prepare its revenge on the anniversary of my defection?"

He had persistent conjunctivitis from the contact lenses that altered his eye color. His legs ached from the lifts in his shoes. His hair was brittle from the dye. Being someone else entailed intensive daily labor. He couldn't get used to it.

Formally, the previous person no longer existed. There was another one now. A foundling, a changeling, with a biography created by masters of lies and transformations.

A different language. Different habits. Even his dreams were different. A different memory that seemed to have subsumed the old one.

The new identity fit him like a prosthetic device; seldom did it feel like a natural part of him.

His body, redrawn by a scalpel, remembered—the visceral memory of guts, liver, and kidneys, where the by-products of existence settle and crystalize, like gallstones and kidney stones. It resisted, even though there was no returning to the past for Vyrin; the banal and metaphorical sentence had a direct juridical force as well.

He learned not to suppress but to value and observe sympathetically the stubbornness of aging flesh, denying the fake, imposed sacrament of second birth. Body, you are the only thing I have left, he would sometimes say with a strange adolescent tenderness. His body truly was the only material evidence that he had once been someone else.

There was other evidence, which he could not access or control. A paper ghost. A spare duplicate of his life. An archival *I* that ordinary people did not possess.

An officer's personnel file.

The extract and essence of his previous self. Not yet a defector. Not yet a traitor.

A light-blue cardboard file. 225 x 330 x 25 mm. Even those dimensions are secret.

Photo ID. File. Autobiography. Employment report. Nondisclosure agreement. Special profiling. Endurance test: three-kilometer cross-country run. Character assessments: documents, documents, documents.

He knew that after his defection an order was promulgated, labeled Top Secret with two zeroes as the number of the case document and headed: "On Measures in Connection with A. V. Vyrin's Treason." He had heard such orders read out in the Secretariat—about other men. All the same, as if written on carbon paper. "Ideological transformation. Moral collapse. Take measures to localize the consequences of treason." Only the names of the people to be punished were changed: personnel officers, heads of education departments, heads of subdepartments who had not shown adequate diligence and had not recognized a potential traitor in time.

But he knew that in his case the public reprimands were for naught. He had served the system with more loyalty than the others. And he was more frightened than the others when the country began falling apart and it looked as if the system would collapse with it.

Vyrin told himself that almost three decades had now passed and the information he had revealed, the agents he had disclosed, were no longer important. The agents would have been burned anyway; someone else would have given them away if not I. I managed to sell them in time, like currency that would soon drop in value catastrophically; another year or two and who would need, say, information on agents among anti-Soviet émigrés or in the ranks of European communist parties? If the USSR itself no longer existed?

Reasoning rationally, Vyrin thought he was relatively safe. But back beyond the border of his homeland, which he could not cross, his personnel file was like a voodoo doll into which the priest could stick his deadly needles at any moment.

That is why he occasionally felt unexplained anxiety, examining arms, belly, neck, and face for unusual rashes, papillomas, those strange signs that prophetic nature sometimes sends people. During those moments he felt there was a vague, fatal connection between flesh and paper; that the document remaining in the archives could sense and therefore knew more than what was written on it, that it had a one-dimensional soul of a fury that could only seek and avenge.

Paper wants blood, he would whisper as he recalled how he was given heavy cardboard files: notes on operational surveillance, notes on operational resolution. Back then he was the beater who drove the prey, not the wild game being hunted. He dealt with people who were exiled, fled, or moved to the West. They left, but their files remained in the archives; if necessary, the files were retrieved or raised—they had this expression in the service, "raising out of the archives."

Out of the cellar. Out of the depths. From the bottom.

The case files had everything. Thousands of pages. Transcripts of telephone conversations. Agent communications. Surveillance reports. "In the morning the subject did not leave the house and was not visited by persons known to intelligence. At 16:05 a car drove into the building courtyard . . . " "At 10:05 the subject left the building for the bakery, where he bought a loaf of white bread."

The pale letters—the typewriter ribbon was worn—seemed to reflect the weakness and anemia of those under surveillance. He remembered thousands of such lines. Their ordinariness used to serve as an aphrodisiac; a visual embodiment of the power of their agency and the insignificance of its domestic enemies—bugs, insects under a loupe.

Now with a new life in a free country, he thought that what he had been reading was a novel by a paranoid author, a text of texts written by a mad state machine of memory. A novel that pursued the extreme aim of capturing life in its entirety and creating a copy for the police.

The state, however, is always a Cyclops; its gaze is not stereoscopic, it is one-sided. It sees only murky signs of loyalty and disloyalty. Reflections of prior suspicions that take illusory form in random events. Therefore a dossier, he thought, is not a duplicate of life. It is a special, dark, truncated twin, fabricated from denunciations, stolen, eavesdropped words, covertly observed scenes; the source of the secret, evil power comprising the ability to tear off the protective covers of quotidian life.

He had created such twins, to use them in the hunt for people.

Now they were hunting him.

Vyrin could not prove that. He could only detect it, feel it with the victim's sixth sense. He knew nothing for sure, their service did not share its secrets, even within itself. He merely guessed that there was—could have been—one more unspoken order, the shadow of that headed: "On Measures in Connection with Treason . . . " The order was also a sentence. Back in the 1990s, Vyrin had given evidence to the police, who were investigating the commercial ties of his former colleagues with fake businesses transferring and laundering money. Back then it seemed harmless. Now it did not.

Psychologists had warned him that he might experience an irrational urge to go to the embassy and turn himself in. Or that he would take ridiculous risks, stupidly overlook the rules of conspiracy, subconsciously try to be exposed.

He had never felt anything like that.

But he did not tell the psychologists that he had a superstitious fear of something quite different: a bad coincidence, some insignificant stray incident, a fatal trifle, an absurdity. Like what happened last month: Vyrin received an official notification in the mail that he had been selected for jury duty.

A lottery, a random hit: a computer program selected him out of the three hundred thousand residents of the city. You could even say it was a good sign, confirmation that his faked identity did not arouse any suspicions among the uninformed bureaucrats and that he was treated like everyone else.

But he tensed up. As if he felt an evil gaze, foreign, seeking contact. They had promised him from the start that his new name would not appear in official registries or on lists. He had to call the officer handling him, who apologized and promised they would get rid of his name; allegedly, the court system had upgraded its program and compatible databases, and that's how the error occurred.

Vyrin insisted that they use the ordinary, legal way and get an excuse for health reasons. That way there would be no electronic trace that could even obliquely indicate Mr. Mihalski's special status. The officer merely chuckled politely.

His former handler still remembered the Cold War. The Wall. He had recently retired. The new guy was just over thirty. When Vyrin defected, the officer was in kindergarten. He probably considered Vyrin superfluous detritus, an old man's junk forgotten in the attic.

He must think the boredom is getting to me, Vyrin thought.

His immediate response was to leave. But he changed his

mind right away: if they were watching him, a hasty departure could give him away. So Vyrin lived a month adhering strictly, even excessively, to his routine behavior as an unsociable bachelor pensioner.

The gnawing anxiety passed; only the usual and tiresome ailments remained.

August had just begun. In the mornings, the farmers' market was filled with the golden buzz of wasps hovering over glistening mounds of burgundy cherries, used in a famous local cake.

The cherries were slightly fermented. In all his travels he had never seen fruit like this, Goliaths among cherries, so large they were disproportionate, ungainly giants. Vyrin bought some seemingly flawless sweet cherries, but could not eat the whole bag: there was too little flavor, dead fruit flesh; it was like kissing unresponsive lips in a narcotic sleep.

He decided to take his favorite long walk, a reward for the many weeks indoors. Starting at the river that divided the city in two, full and murky after the rains; its crazed waters, flying, turning to foam, then becoming a wave; repeatedly changing its nature every second. Vyrin went into the hills, the forest, dark even on a sunny summer day.

He went up the street that led away from the main square, past a house beloved by sightseers with a dormer roof projecting over the street and under which stood an outlandish statue: a mustached Janissary in a painted vest, scimitar in his right hand, shield in his left; it was a reminder of the ruthless Turkish siege, the former threat from the East.

Vyrin no longer looked at the city as a tourist. He was not amused by the dancing figures in the church clock, or the steep

funicular, or the tunnels through the castle mountain. However, this lone assassin with two moons on his shield, crescents turned away from each other, like reverse parentheses—a divinity of a dangerous moment, an evil hour—was not a mere amusement for Vyrin. He felt that if a killer were to come for his soul, the Janissary would warn him, give him a sign.

Tourists crowded around the house with the Janissary. He heard the words of his native tongue spoken fluently—after his isolation they sounded so unexpected and piercing, as if they contained a hidden meaning unknown to the speaker himself. Vyrin smoothly crossed the street and looked, without turning his head, at the reflection in a store window: nothing special, a Sunday excursion.

Blocks of individual houses. The botanical gardens on the outskirts. The windows of the greenhouses were fogged from inside, as if the alien tropical vegetation had adopted the predatory ways of reptiles and insects and was exhaling hotly, oozing toxic sweat, gathering strength to escape outside.

Vyrin reached the dirt road, zigzagging up the valley slopes.

The forest was fabulously immense. It grew along the swollen slopes of the limestone ridge, falling steeply into the misty undergrowth, the green loam of ferns and mosses. Distances were lost in it, and the road looped sharply, with the sun shining sometimes from the right, then from the left. Just when you thought that you had lost your way, the cathedral bell rang out rich and clear in the distance; actually, it was the resonant response of the bell's brass—edifying, encouraging, and dissipating all anxiety—that Vyrin liked about this path through old firs, reminiscent of the forests of his childhood.

He walked, feeling his body fill with blessed tiredness. Vyrin knew every root, every hole on this path, and he looked forward to seeing the pasture on the left, fenced by rowan trees—the berries would be ripe in color by now—and then he would encounter the sweet, gentle chimney smoke from the farm. The walk both tired and invigorated him; his recent fears seemed silly. I guess I really am old, he thought. I've become neurotically fearful.

He could see the cathedral from the last turn. It stood on a stone outcropping that divided the top of the valley. The yellow façade, framed by two bell towers, continued upward from the vertical plane of the cliff. This church was much larger than the cathedral in town. It had been built here, in the mountains, by the pass, on an ancient pilgrimage path, its majestic vaults signifying the depth and significance of someone's epiphany, an acquisition of faith that took place in the silent solitude of the outcropping.

Beyond the cathedral's back wall, in the shade of chestnut trees, lay a small outdoor restaurant with good food. The regular waiters recognized him—or pretended to. They did not try to chat but smiled respectfully. Here he fully felt he was Mr. Mihalski; he took that pleasant and exciting sense of connection, the merging of true and invented identities, as a special gift which he brought back home in the trolley that traveled along the bottom of the valley.

Today the courtyard was full: a summer weekend. There was only one free table, at the edge behind a wide-branching tree. Next to the sandbox and swings. That meant frenzied children would run around, making noise. Vyrin preferred sitting among people dining sedately, behind strangers, in the buzz of calm

conversation, the clinking of knives and forks, where it is hard to eavesdrop, photograph, or take aim.

Vyrin looked at the diners: Was anyone about to leave? No, they were all relaxed, in a merry lazy mood. The brunette at the nearby table had a provocative drop of crème brûlée on her upper lip. She didn't wipe it away or lick it off, knowing how seductive and sexy it looked. She wore a dark metal necklace resembling a dog collar—a sign of exotic passions, kinky torment insolently displayed in a restaurant by a church.

The brunette's sister, in her eighth month at least—her swollen belly had pulled her dress up to reveal strong, plump legs—was eating chocolate cake and schnitzel simultaneously with great appetite, as if the infant were overripe, born but remaining in the womb, and demanding his share of the feast.

Vyrin wanted to leave. He was dizzy with fatigue, the heavy scents, the density of human voices—the village was small, everyone was related in some cousinhood, redolent of fetid incest that repulses outsiders like salty seawater.

But he felt the charm of the play of light in the chestnut leaves, the clay-blue tablecloths pressed so that there wasn't a single wrinkle, the high-necked bottles of ice water, the harmless murmur of neighbors, the balletic moves of waiters balancing enormous trays of six to eight plates on their shoulders, where atop the delicately tossed salad looking as if arranged by a coiffeur, the leaves green with reddish veins, floated golden-breaded schnitzels, resembling torn blobs of copper blasted from a smelting furnace.

Yum, yum, yum the pregnant woman crooned to her unborn infant. The limestone angel with a blurred face blew silently into a golden trumpet over the back entrance to the church. He felt

himself basking in the insouciant summer that enveloped the entire world.

Vyrin ordered beer and a steak. Wasps flew toward the fragrant hops. They were not attracted by the remains of dessert on nearby plates, rivulets of honey and chocolate—only by hops. They crawled around the rim of the mug and tried to land on his shoulder, his hand, circling persistently and stubbornly. He waved them away, almost spilling his beer. He had a bad allergy to insect bites. Back when he was in the service, the doctors said it would get worse over the years and offered to give him a medical discharge. Wasps, wasps, wasps—he moved the mug away, flicked a wasp, and then another, from the table, regretting he had not brought a jacket.

A sting. On the nape of his bare neck. Sudden. As painful as an injection administered by an inexperienced nurse.

He slapped the bite, but the wasp was gone. He turned, intent on the pain, and noticed a man walking away and getting into a car. The license plates were not local.

His neck ached. The pain spread up and down, to his shoulder, cheek, temple. He felt something microscopic in the wound—probably the stinger.

His vision clouded. His breathing became shallow. His body was engulfed by dry heat. He got up with difficulty and headed for the toilet.

Rinse. He needed to rinse with cold water. Take a pill. But wash first. Such pressure in his throat! He might not be able to swallow the pill. His skin was burning.

He could barely stand. He leaned against the sink, clumsily splashed water on his face. The wasp sting was on the right side

of his neck, and his right arm was stiff. He shoved the tablet into his throat. The mirror showed a gray, bloodless, but swollen face, as if something was trying to undo the plastic surgery and force his old look back on him.

The tablet should have worked by now. It was the latest medicine.

But it wasn't working.

A rash broke out on the gray skin. His stomach cramped. He sank to the floor, staring at the tiles—and understood. That man had not been a customer at the restaurant. Locals didn't park where he had stopped the car.

With a final effort, he rose and holding on to the walls made his way into the corridor. His constricted throat kept him from screaming, calling for help. On the porch, he bumped into a waiter carrying a tray of bottles and wineglasses. The waiter assumed he was dead drunk and moved aside. He fell from the porch, taking the waiter with him, hearing the crashing glass and hoping that everyone noticed and was looking. He hissed and gurgled into someone's ear:

"Ambulance . . . police . . . murder . . . not drunk . . . poison . . . I was poisoned."

And he collapsed, still hearing the sounds of the world but no longer understanding what they meant.

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