

# The Secret Speech

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Extract

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Seated at his kitchen table, Leo stared at the sheet of paper. Three words were all that remained of the document that had resulted in Suren Moskvín taking his own life:

*Under torture, Eikhe*

Leo had read the words over and over again, unable to take his eyes off them. Out of context, their effect was nonetheless hypnotic. Breaking their spell, he pushed the sheet of paper aside and picked up his case, laying it flat on the table. Inside were two classified files. In order to obtain access to them he'd needed clearance. There'd been no difficulty regarding the first file, on Suren Moskvín. However, the second had prompted questions. The second file he'd requested was on Robert Eikhe.

Opening the first set of documents, he felt the weight of this man's past, the number of pages accumulated on him. Moskvín had been a State Security officer – just like Leo – a *Chekist*, for far longer than Leo had ever served, keeping his job while thousands of officers were shot. Included in the file was a list: the denouncements Moskvín had made throughout his career:

*Nestor Iurovsky. Neighbour. Executed*

*Rozalia Reisner. Friend. 10 years*

*Iakov Blok. Shopkeeper. 5 years*

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*Karl Uritsky. Colleague. Guard. 10 years*

Nineteen years of service, two pages of denouncements and nearly one hundred names – yet he'd only ever given up one family member.

*Iona Radek. Cousin. Executed*

Leo recognized a technique. The dates of the denouncements were haphazard, many falling in one month and then nothing for several months. The chaotic spacing was deliberate, hiding careful calculation. Denouncing his cousin had almost certainly been strategic. Moskvina needed to make sure it didn't look as if his loyalty to the State stopped at his family. To suffuse his list with credibility the cousin had been sacrificed: protection from the allegation that he only named people who didn't matter to him personally. A consummate survivor, this man was an improbable suicide.

Checking the dates and locations of where Moskvina had worked, Leo sat back in surprise. They'd been colleagues: both of them employed at the Lubyanka seven years ago. Their paths had never crossed, at least not that he could remember. Leo had been an investigator, making arrests, following suspects. Moskvina had been a guard, transporting prisoners, supervising their detention. Leo had done his utmost to avoid the basement interrogation cells, as if believing the floorboards shielded him from the activities that were carried on below, day after day. If Moskvina's suicide was an expression of guilt, what had triggered such extreme feelings after all this time? Leo shut the folder, turning his attention to the second file.

Robert Eikhe's file was thicker, heavier, the front cover stamped

CLASSIFIED, the pages bound shut as if to keep something noxious trapped inside. Leo unwound the string. The name seemed familiar. Glancing at the pages he saw that Eikhe had been a Party member since 1905 – before the revolution – at a time when being a member of the Communist Party meant exile or execution. His record was impeccable: a former candidate for the Central Committee Politburo. Despite this, he'd been arrested on 29 April 1938. Plainly, this man was no traitor. Yet Eikhe had confessed: the protocol was in the file, page after page detailing his anti-soviet activity. Leo had drafted too many pre-prepared confessions not to recognize this as the work of an agent, punctuated with stock phrases: signs of the in-house style, the template to which any person might be forced to sign their name. Flicking forward, Leo found a declaration of innocence written by Eikhe while imprisoned. In contrast to the confession, the prose was human, desperate, pitifully heaping praise on the Party, proclaiming love for the State and pointing out with timid modesty the injustice of his arrest. Leo read, hardly able to breathe:

*Not being able to suffer the tortures to which I was submitted by Ushakov and Nikolayev – especially by the former, who utilized the knowledge that my broken ribs have not properly mended and caused me great pain – I have been forced to accuse myself and others.*

Leo knew what would follow next.

On 4 February 1940 Eikhe had been shot.

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Raisa stood, watching her husband. Engrossed in classified files, he was oblivious to her presence. This vision of Leo – pale, tense, shoulders hunched over secret documents, the fate of other

people in his hands – could have been sliced from their unhappy past. The temptation was to react as she'd done so many times before, to walk away, to avoid and ignore him. The rush of bad memories hit her like a kind of nausea. She fought against the sensation. Leo was not that man anymore. She was no longer trapped in that marriage. Walking forward, she reached out, resting a hand on his shoulder, appointing him the man she'd learned to love.

Leo flinched at her touch. He hadn't noticed his wife enter the room. Caught unawares, he felt exposed. He stood up abruptly, the chair clattering behind him. Eye to eye, he saw her nervousness. He'd never wanted her to feel that way again. He should have explained what he was doing. He'd fallen into old habits, silence and secrets. He put his arms around her. She rested her head on his shoulder, and he knew she was peering down at the files. He explained:

—*A man killed himself, a former MGB agent.*

—*Someone you knew?*

—*Not that I remember.*

—*You have to investigate?*

—*Suicide is treated as—*

She interrupted.

—*I mean . . . does it have to be you?*

Raisa wanted him to pass the case over, to have nothing to do with the MGB, even indirectly. He pulled back.

—*The case won't take long.*

She nodded, slowly, before changing the subject:

—*The girls are in bed. Are you going to read for them? Maybe you're busy?*

—*No, I'm not busy.*

He put the files back in the case. Passing his wife, he leaned in to kiss her, a kiss that she gently blocked with a finger, looking into his eyes. She said nothing, before removing her finger and kissing

him – a kiss that felt as if he was making the most unbreakable and sacred of promises.

Entering his bedroom, he placed the files out of sight, an old habit. Changing his mind, he retrieved them, leaving them on the side table for Raisa should she want to read them. He hurried back down the hallway on his way to his daughters' bedroom, trying to smooth the tension from his face. Smiling broadly, he opened the door.

Leo and Raisa had adopted two young sisters. Zoya was now fourteen years old, and Elena seven. Leo moved toward Elena's bed, perching on the edge, picking up a book from the cabinet, a children's story by Yury Strugatsky. He opened the book and began to read aloud. Almost immediately Zoya interrupted:

—*We've heard this before.*

She waited a moment before adding:

—*We hated it the first time.*

The story concerned a young boy who wanted to be a miner. The boy's father, also a miner, had died in an accident and the boy's mother was fearful of her son continuing in such a dangerous profession. Zoya was right: Leo had read this before. Zoya summarized contemptuously:

—*The son ends up digging more coal than anyone has ever dug before, becomes a national hero and dedicates his prize to the memory of his father.*

Leo shut the book.

—*You're right. It's not very good. But Zoya, while it's okay for you to say whatever you please in this house, be more careful outside. Expressing critical opinions, even about trivial matters, like a children's story, is dangerous.*

—*You going to arrest me?*

Zoya had never accepted Leo as her guardian. She'd never forgiven him for the death of her parents. Leo didn't refer to himself as their father. And Zoya would call him Leo Demidov,

addressing him formally, putting as much distance between them as possible. She took every opportunity to remind him that she was living with him out of practical considerations, using him as a means to an end: providing material comforts for her sister, freeing her from the orphanage. Even so, she took care that nothing impressed her, not the apartment, not their outings, daytrips or meals. As stern as she was beautiful, there was no softness in her appearance. Perpetual unhappiness seemed vitally important to her. There was little Leo could do to encourage her to shrug it off. He hoped that at some point relations would slowly improve. He was still waiting. He would, if necessary, wait forever.

—*No, Zoya, I don't do that anymore. And I never will again.*

Leo reached down, picking up one of the *Detskaya Literatura* journals, printed for children across the country. Before he could start, Zoya cut in:

—*Why don't you make up a story? We'd like that, wouldn't we, Elena?*

When Elena had first arrived in Moscow, she'd been very young, only four years old, young enough to adapt to the changes in her life. In contrast to her older sister, she'd made friends and worked hard at school. Susceptible to flattery, she sought her teachers' praise, trying to please everyone, including her new guardians.

Elena became anxious. She understood from the tone of her sister's voice that she was expected to agree. Embarrassed at having to take sides, she merely nodded. Leo, sensing danger, replied:

—*There are plenty of stories we haven't read. I'm sure I can find one we like.*

Zoya wouldn't relent:

—*They're all the same. Tell us something new. Make something up.*

—*I doubt I'd be very good.*

—*You're not even going to try? My father used to make up all kinds of stories. Set it on a remote farm, a farm in winter, with the ground covered in a layer of snow.*

*The nearby river is frozen. It could start like this: Once upon a time there are two young girls, sisters . . .*

*—Zoya, please.*

*—The sisters live with their mother and their father and they're as happy as can be. Until one day a man, in a uniform, came to arrest them and—*

Leo interrupted:

*—Zoya? For Elena, please?*

Zoya glanced at her sister and stopped. Elena was crying. Leo stood up.

*—You're both tired. I'll find some better books tomorrow. I promise.*

Leo turned the light off and closed the door. In the hallway, he comforted himself that things would get better, eventually. All Zoya needed was a little more time.

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Zoya lay in bed, listening to the sound of her sister sleeping – her slow, soft intakes of breath. When they'd lived on the farm with their parents, the four of them had shared a small room with thick mud walls, warmed by a wood fire. Zoya would sleep beside Elena under their coarse, hand-stitched blankets. The sound of her little sister sleeping meant safety: it meant their parents were nearby. It didn't belong here, in this apartment, with Leo in the room next door.

Zoya never fell asleep easily. She'd lie in bed for hours, churning thoughts before exhaustion overcame her. She was the only person who clung to the truth: the only person who refused to forget. She eased herself out of bed. Aside from her little sister breathing, the apartment was silent. She crept to the door, her eyes already adjusted to the darkness. She navigated the hallway by keeping her hand on the wall. In the kitchen, street lighting leaked in through the window. Moving nimbly, like a thief, she

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opened a drawer and took hold of the handle, feeling the weight of the knife.

Pressing the blade flat against her leg, Zoya walked toward Leo's bedroom. Slowly she pushed open the door until there was enough space that she could sidestep inside. She moved silently over the wood floor. The curtains were drawn, the room dark, but she knew the layout, where to tread in order to reach Leo, sleeping on the far side.

Standing directly over him, Zoya raised the knife. Although she couldn't see him, her imagination mapped the contours of his body. She wouldn't stab him in the stomach: the blankets might absorb the blade. She'd plunge the blade through his neck, sinking it as far as she could, before he had a chance to overpower her. Knife outstretched, she pressed down with perfect control. Through the blade she felt his arm, his shoulder – she steered upward, making small depressions until the knife tip touched directly onto his skin. In position, all she had to do was grip the handle with both hands and push down.