Life's Sequel

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1.

Or I could have called it *The Art Director*. Meaning? Well, because sometimes life is merely that.

I do not know whether it has been noticed that Nabokov's first published English story has, aesthetically, a remarkably clear precedent in his early "The Passenger" (*Passazhir*, 1927), a schematic piece whose frame is outlined by a burnt match dropped in the critic's empty wineglass at the beginning and bobbing in his wine at the end.[1]

> Yes, Life is more talented than we," sighed the writer … "The plots Life thinks up now and then! How can we compete with that goddess? Her works are untranslatable, indescribable."
>
> "Copyright by the author," suggested the critic …
>
> "Our last recourse, then, is to cheat," continued the writer … "All that's left to us is to treat her creations as a film producer does a famous novel … having an entertaining film unfold without a hitch, punishing virtue in the beginning and vice at the end, a film perfectly natural in terms of its own conventions and, above all, furnished with an unexpected but all-resolving outcome."

In fact, the entire first page of that story can be read as a swollen description of the real plot of "The Assistant Producer"—or as a theoretical postscript to its translation (say, into Russian). In the event, *Nabokov's Dozen* ends on a pointedly dry "Bibliographic Note" where no wind *ex Ponto* blows; but neither is it dead calm. The last two sentences on the very last page of the book close it with a dictum that is more terse than it is wry:

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[1] Nabokov seems to imply, in his note to the English translation, that this match was an oversight on his part, but I find this hard to believe, as this sort of thing—usually more intricate, true—had become a regular circumscribing device at least three years earlier. In this story Nabokov is a super-author who silently points out that the critic is absent-minded, the writer, self-centered, and neither observant enough.

> "The Assistant Producer" is based on actual facts. As to the rest, I am no more guilty of imitating "real life" than "real life" is responsible for plagiarizing me.

The notion of life plagiarizing the artist has long since become a frightful banality, and, like every banality, it has become, or come round to, a dull absurdity. Here is Life's belated response, so much more precise, ingenious, even much better structured, and infinitely more poignantly tragic than Nabokov's version of the brutal and perfidious kidnapping of General Miller (Nabokov calls him "Fedchenko"), "based on actual facts" but fitted into an anemic cinema frame and narrated in the first person by a former priest who heard the principal villains' confessions. Their victim was deprived of that privilege.

What follows is based on the actual facts from the amazing material collected by B. Kraevski and published in an ephemeral Moscow magazine, *The Assembly of Nobility* (*Dvorianskoe Sobranie,* No. 2, 1995), and reprinted in the more accessible Russian-language periodical *Le Messager*.[2] To check and complement it, I have also consulted the few other available sources, such as an earlier account by one of Eltsin's assistants,[3] and one recent piece, by a certain Anton Uhtkin, in the utterly unreliable *Versia: Top Secret,*[4] which nevertheless offers a few interesting new bits and some fascinating photographs (see endnote for their description).

2.

The reader of *Nabokov Studies* need not be given the long story of the short. For transition's sake, however, I will remind him that when "The Assistant

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[2] Or *Vestnik*—of the Russian Christian Students Movement, of which General Miller was a member, No. 178, 1998, 159–82. This reprint is entitled "*Pokhishchenie generala E.K. Millera*" [The Abduction of General E.K. Miller].

[3] Viacheslav Kostikov, *Ne budem proklinat' izgnan'e: Puti i sud'by russkoi emigratsii* [Let Us Not Damn Expatriation: Paths and Destinies of the Russian Emigration]. Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnoshenia, 1990.

[4] "*Ulovimye mstiteli*" [Not-so-elusive Avengers]. *Versia: Top Secret*, February 10–16, 2003, No. 5 (228), 18–19. This is a glib and lurid weekly modeled after grocery-store gossip rags. The front-page headlines of the issue in point run from "Striptease on Feast Days" to "Attack of the Clones" to "Hitler in a Test-tube." There may be a printed *version*; the electronic one is at http://versiasovsek.ru/2003/5/weeklyread/1217.html.

Producer" ends, "La Slavska" is dead in a prison hospital; her husband emerges in cinematic California; and the mystery of General Miller's fate remains unsolved, though only too easy to project and too horrible to imagine. However, it may be just as well to go over the "actual facts" as they were reported in the émigré newspapers at the time (and whence Nabokov got them), with some later corrections and revisions.

Shortly past noon on September 22, 1937, General Evgenii Karlovich Miller, the head of the Union of Joint Russian Warriors—an émigré organization of former White Armies officers—left the Union's headquarters in rue du Colisée. On his way out, he stopped by the office of General Kussonski, the chief of staff, handed him a sealed letter, and said that he had many errands to run that day, and in fact had to go to a luncheon appointment right away, adding: "You may think that I am out of my mind, but I want to leave with you this note which I ask you not to open." Whereupon General Miller left, never to be seen again. At around eleven o'clock that night, his wife alerted the police and General Kussonski, who recalled the letter. It read as follows:

> I have a rendez-vous today at half past noon with General Skoblin, at the corner of rue Jasmin and rue Raffet, and he is supposed to take me to a meeting with a German officer, a military agent in the Baltic states, Colonel Stromann, and also with a Mr. Werner who is attached to the embassy here. Both speak good Russian. The meeting is arranged at Skoblin's bidding. It could be a trap, and so I leave this note just in case.
>
> General E. Miller, 22 September 1937.

They called in Major General Nikolai Skoblin, who was de facto in charge of the Union's counter-intelligence. When asked when was the last time he saw General Miller, Skoblin replied that he had not seen him that day at all. He stubbornly held to that flagrant nonsense even upon learning about the letter. They agreed to go together (the two generals plus Admiral Kedrov) to the police and file a formal report. While Kussonski and Kedrov tarried on the stair landing, Skoblin, who was briskly walking down ahead of them, ran away. Nobody ever saw that man again either.

The French authorities applied themselves to the case earnestly and quite efficiently (contrary to Nabokov's priest's version)—they blocked railway stations, border checkpoints, and seaports, mounted a vigorous enough search, and very soon turned up a great number of important details, links, and discoveries. The most appalling of these was that General Skoblin, former commander of the famed Kornilov Regiment and a Civil War hero, and his wife Nadezhda Plevitskaya, the wildly popular performer of soulful Russian folk songs, were secret operative agents in the Soviet service, encoded in their

N.K.V.D. files as “Farmer” and “Farmer’s wife.”[5] The police established very quickly that at one o’clock on September 22, a huge Ford lorry owned by the Soviet plenipotentiary office drove up to an (empty) school building on the Soviet diplomatic compound, parked there, and very soon left. Past four o’clock that afternoon that lorry showed up at the pier wall of the port of Le Havre where the Soviet freight liner *Maria Oulianoff* was unloading. The French customs were shown papers stating that a “diplomatic cargo” was to be taken aboard, and four men from the Soviet ship—instead of the French stevedores as usual—carried a long and heavy box from the lorry on board. The port authorities found it odd that after that delivery the unloading of sheepskins was suddenly halted (of the 5522 bundles brought to Le Havre fewer than five thousand had been moved ashore) and the Soviet skipper, citing a radiogrammed order to go back immediately, took his boat off the pier.

The report of the mysterious box and of the hurried departure of a Soviet ship reached Paris without delay and the connection with General Miller’s disappearance was established at once. Édouard Daladier, who at the time was Minister of National Defense, promptly summoned the Soviet plenipotentiary representative Potemkin and suggested that he cable his government in Moscow the request to turn the ship round for inspection. Potemkin simply refused. The French briefly toyed with the idea of ordering a cruising destroyer to intercept the *Maria Oulianoff*, but some members of the Cabinet were loath to blunder badly, vacillated too long, and soon the ship was beyond their reach.

A week-long trial, on charges of kidnapping, opened in December in the Palace of Justice. The evidence was ample and incontestable, and both Skoblin, in absentia, and his wife, who was present and tried as his accomplice, were convicted, he to a life term in a hard labor penitentiary, she to a twenty-year term. The appeals of the defense failed and Mme Plevitskaya was put in jail in Rennes, in Brittany, department Ille-et-Vilaine (a hydronym that sounds as if Nabokov had personally picked it out, if not made it up). She was complaining of pain in her foot (or leg) when the Germans occupied Brittany, and they moved her to a military hospital where her limb was amputated. Two weeks later, in October (and not in the summer, as in the story) of 1940, she died. Prior to all this horror, she had asked a police commissar to visit her from Paris and apparently imparted to him some details of the kidnapping, something she had refused to do at the trial.

Nothing else was known of General Miller’s plight for half a century. And perhaps nothing would have been learned of it at all had it not been for a thin—thinned—folder that survived in the *wrong file* in the archives of the Soviet secret police and made available by the persistent effort of Mr. Kraevski during the unbridled period of the early 1990s when such astounding finds were possible.

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[5] “Fermersha”; that detail came to light only in 1990. See Kostikov 350–404, and my *Aerial View* 84–85.

3.

The folder contains several letters in General Miller's hand. The first two he wrote, in pencil, during the first week after his abduction, giving them to his interrogator in the N.K.V.D. internal prison in Lesser Lubianka Street with a request to send them to his wife and his colleague. The general was put in the special solitary cell 110 whence he wrote these two letters, in the piercingly naïve hope, perhaps planted by his sadistic jailers straight from the *Invitation* script, that they might indeed be delivered. All his emigration experience notwithstanding, he could not recognize and grasp the new horrible reality into which he was so suddenly thrust. Just as Nabokov's soft-shelled visitor to the museum was utterly unfit to endure the darkling permafrost of Leninburg, Miller cannot yet come to realize that as far as the world at large is concerned he is *dead*, and that his captors will never let him, or a word by him or about him, out. If he did, he probably would not have written those striking letters, in which he reveals noble directness and trust, deliberately underestimating his enemies. But then the folder would have been thinner still, and there would have been even fewer people to remember him.

First he writes to his wife:

> Tuesday September 29
>
> Dear Tata,
>
> I embrace you, can't write where I am, only that after a rather long journey which ended this morning I want to report that I am alive and well and feel sound physically. They treat me very well, food is excellent, I saw familiar places on the way here. What happened to me and in what manner, and why I left so suddenly, without even warning you about my more or less possible and prolonged absence, took me by surprise as well; someday, God willing, I'll tell you more about it, but for now I implore you to brace yourself as best you can, calm down, and we shall both live hoping that our separation will end some day …
>
> Needless to say, I can't write anything about myself. I can only tell you that I left the Office round noon, coatless, as it was warm, intending to come back in an hour or hour and a half. Here, where I am now, the

> weather is fine, but a little bit on the chilly side already. I was given an excellent new overcoat, a new undershirt, underpants, and worsted socks. So you should not worry on that score either. I hope to be able to give you an address at which you could write and let me know about your health and that of the children and grandchildren …
>
> I embrace you tenderly, my darling, and pray to God that this ordeal may yet end well.
>
> With much, much love,
>
> (signed)

The second letter is for General Kussonski, also in pencil:

> 20–30.9. 1937 [*an odd range of dates, but the general's mind had still not cleared up from the overdose of chloroform*]
>
> Dear Pavel Alexeevich,
>
> Today marks almost a week since I, saying goodbye just past noon, handed you a letter asking you to read it if I did not come back in a couple of hours. I had some subconscious premonition that N.V. S[koblin] was dragging me into something possibly dangerous. But of course nothing of what happened could I either envision or even imagine. I can't, of course, describe to you what happened that Tuesday, or how it happened, or where I am now, for a letter so written would doubtless have not been sent to you. I have not the slightest idea what happened in Paris and how it happened after I "was made unserviceable." I would like only to write you regarding some internal and personal matters, which have to do with other people entirely uninvolved in any sort of politics …

Kraevski does not give this letter in its entirety, but what he quotes is in certain ways no less telling than the general's letter to his wife. From his dungeon, not a week after having been ruthlessly strong-armed, drugged, squeezed into a coffin-like box and shipped like so much cargo, still reeling and raddled, he musters enough courage to write his colleague precise, minute instructions as to the management of various charities that the Union carried out on a scale much grander than Nabokov's narrating priest reports. Here are some remarkable extracts from those excerpts:

> … Labzin lives at … I promised a monthly supplement of F150, out of the stipend fund, for his grandson, to add to the F350 that he said he would pay out of pocket. In the middle drawer of my desk at home you

> will find an envelope labeled "Stipend Business," there is F100 inside ...
>
> … I promised Mme Rodionoff F300 (or 350, don't remember now, but it's written down in … the brown notebook) for her son …
>
> … I also promised about F200 a month to Captain Anderson, I think—there should be an entry in the reddish-brown notebook under "Stipends."
>
> … Also: around the 14th or 15th a man, whose rank I do not remember and whose name sounded like Shpilevski, petitioned in behalf of two cadets, his son and a relative, pointing to the battleground merits of the latter's father during the Great War. As I had had no money left, I asked him to give me a written application that I could then present to one of the well-to-do Russians. I had in mind Count Kotzebue who had recently married some German princess … I received his application only on Monday the 21st or Tuesday 22nd and therefore did not have time to write the Count. Do this for me and on my behalf [*and Miller goes on to suggest, in much detail, who else could be tapped for more money for these two young men*].
>
> … There is also a serious question concerning rent for the offices … On the 1st of October we'll have to pay F5,000 … That sum is [*exact instructions follow as to which folders and envelopes contain what amounts or securities*]. The extra F1,000 was meant to pay up my IOU by October 15, in favor of the barrister who is handling the lawsuit … against us [*an eviction litigation*] … Let him wait until I come back, else let him look for me all round God's wide world. Because of my involuntary absence no payment can be made on my IOU, and by that time [*which?*] my bank accounts will dry up, so that there won't be even a hundred francs there; and I do not own an apartment. Let's consider this to be fate's furtive smile, amidst the hurricane that has rolled over me.
>
> … Future is in God's hand. Perhaps we'll see each other some day.
>
> Sincerely yours, General Miller.

On November 4 he lodges with the head of the internal prison a request to notify his wife that he is alive. One doubts that those who read his note flashed even a furtive smile.

At that very time, Miller's two-faced kidnapper (and Nabokov's focal persona), General Skoblin, turns up on some operative dacha—Kraevsky plausibly suspects Bolshevo, near Moscow, where Sergey Efron, Tsvetaeva's husband and, like Skoblin, an N.K.V.D. agent, was waiting for instructions after escaping from Europe. Efron also took part in abductions, possibly including that of Miller, if not Kutepov. His letter to his superior is remarkable by its repulsive servility, and by certain grotesque parallelisms—he, too, begs to help his wife left behind in Paris. Little did he know that it would be filed with his victim's letters. If Nabokov had known this letter and inserted it into his story verbatim, he would have been accused, understandably, of grossly overplaying the absurdity of evil at the expense of style.

From this letter one can gather that Skoblin was kept under more or less strict watch. I keep untouched his phrasing and even his capitalization.

> 11 November 1937
>
> Dear Comrade Stakh![6]
>
> I take this opportunity to send you a letter and ask you to accept a belated but most heart-felt congratulation on the 20th anniversary of our Soviet Union.[7]
>
> My heart is now filled with special pride, for at this juncture [*"v nastoiashchii moment," a Soviet fixed phrase*] I belong, wholly and entirely, to the Soviet Union, and no longer do I feel the ambivalence that had artificially existed prior to September 22nd. Now I am perfectly free to tell everyone about my Great Leader Comrade Stalin and my Motherland—the Soviet Union.
>
> Recently I had a chance here to leaf through some old magazines, and I came across this year's first issue of the *Bolshevik* monthly. It was with much interest that I read it all, but the article "Bolsheviks on the North Pole" made a particular impression upon me. At the end of that article they quote the Hero of the Soviet Union Vodopianov. When, before his flight, they asked him, "How will you fly over to the Pole, how will you land there? What if you crash—it's a long way back on foot!"—he answered: "If I crash, I will not walk on foot, because behind me I feel a force, a might: Comrade Stalin will not abandon a man!"
>
> These words, said quietly but with an unbending faith, have had a strong influence on me, too. At present I remain firm, strong, and at peace, and I, too, believe that Comrade Stalin will not abandon a man.
>
> There was only one thing that made me sad, which was that on November 7, when all our multi-million-strong country celebrated the day, I could not have "Vasen'ka"[8] share my feeling about the great feast.

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[6] A code nickname, no doubt.

[7] Fresh from abroad, he gets it, technically, wrong; the U.S.S.R. was formed in 1922.

[8] Either a pet name, or another code name, for his wife; it could be both. Her patronymic was Vassilievna.

> Before I knew it, two more weeks had passed since your last visit. Nothing new has happened in my personal life. Being idle and bored, I have taken up Spanish, but knowing nothing about my "Vasen'ka," I can't give it my undivided attention. Do you think that Georgy Nikolaevich should visit me now and work out certain steps concerning "Vasen'ka" directly? I could have offered a number of suggestions of a psychological nature, which could be of enormous moral significance, given the almost two-month long imprisonment [*his or hers?*] and the need to encourage her and, above all, to calm her down.
>
> I shake your hand firmly.
>
> Yours sincerely—

One doubts that Skoblin survived his wife or even his victim.

In the meantime, General Miller went through a month of incessant interrogation. On December 27, Nikolay Ezhov entered his cell with his entourage and tried to question him personally, but Miller did not know that his visitor was the chief of the Soviet Geheimstaatspolizei himself until the very last moment, and refused to give answers. The next day he wrote Ezhov a letter in which he explains his mistake and wonders why his written depositions about the activities of the Union that were demanded of him were never collected by the investigator Vlasov who had visited him last on October 10. He repeats his request to let his wife know that he is alive, to allow him to write his memoirs, to give back his pocket watch, because he can't tell time in his dark cell. He attached to his letter an eighteen-page deposition that clearly stated that neither he nor the Warriors Union had anything to do with clandestine or subversive operations within the U.S.S.R. The whole long document (which ends: "I hereby relate everything that my memory has retained …") contains not a single fact, name, address, or date, thus making it worthless for his jailers.

On March 30, 1938, Miller writes another letter to Ezhov, with the same insistent plea to notify his wife:

> I take the liberty of asking you once more to grant me my request, which I set forth in my petition of November 4 and restated in my appeal to you of December 28 of the past year, namely to give permission to send my wife a very brief note to let her know that I am alive and relatively well … I remember so vividly the terrible suffering of the wife of General Kutepov who did not know the plight of her husband, and all of us who knew him suffered along with her, imagining all those horrors and physical tortures that must have awaited him in Moscow …

It pains one to see that the good-hearted Miller can still hope against hope to soften his beastly addressee by referring to the suffering of Kutepov's widow, something that could have evinced only wicked glee. In that letter he also asks Ezhov to let him attend a church service.

Both foreigners and Russians captured abroad and cast into Soviet jails invariably spent a long and hard time trying to understand and get accustomed to the true conditions of the world that suddenly engulfed them—there are numerous examples in Solzhenitsyn's books and many others. But when such a prisoner found himself in solitary confinement, he could never learn the real meaning of those conditions. Like Cincinnatus, he may spend oodles of mind-wrenching time trying to assess his situation, sounding off possibilities by available moves, grasping at fleeting, straw-like thoughts, writing strictly rationed petitions in which he would ask permission to write memoirs, devising strategies in case he is summoned by his investigator or another crew-cut or fluffy-haired higher-up enters his cell, etc. (One source, the flippant *Versia*, vaguely hints that once Stalin paid him a visit.) Unlike Cincinnatus, Miller could not write anything but those appointed petitions, had no visitors, probably saw no one but his convoy who might (or might not) take him upstairs for a completely isolated outing on the walled roof of the Lubianka prison, and would experience no flash of revelation even as he was being escorted to his "block" (the execution basement near the crematorium oven).

Also unlike Cincinnatus, he could fill the enormity of the unreliable space of time accorded him with private prayer, as he was a deeply religious man—another curious intersection with one of the aerial themes of Nabokov's short story. He even makes a pathetic attempt to talk People's Commissar Ezhov into letting him attend Lenten services at a church by referring to official Soviet statements, and specifically Lenin's, with regard to the "freedom of religious confession in the U.S.S.R.":

> Assuming that Lenin's precepts are respected and carried out by his disciples and heirs—the current masters of the Russian people, in whose complete control I happen to be at present—I take the liberty of seeking your permission to attend one of the Moscow churches of your choice next week in preparation for Easter.[9]

As if this were not enough to make his thigh-slapping jailer's day, General

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[9] "Otgovet'," a verb which must have sounded as outlandish to Ezhov as "genuflect" would to a hedgehog. It refers to the period of special preparation of an Orthodox Christian for the mystery of the Holy Communion by fasting, attending Church services, and confessing.

Miller goes on to explain that he won't be recognized in the street on his way to the church—a point that he must have carefully thought up, reflecting on the extreme measures his wardens and convoy took to prevent any chance encounters with other prisoners and to cocoon him tightly.

> As for the apparently undesirable possibility of meeting someone who could recognize me, I think such a concern would be utterly ungrounded … [In the past] I had had very few acquaintances in Moscow, and now, 20 years later, death, emigration, and banishments must have carried off even the last of those who used to know me. Besides, I could cover my face with a kerchief, and in any event, my present look of a civilian old man resembles but little the youthful 47-year-old general who left Moscow in 1914.

Needless to say, he never received an answer to any of his letters. Nevertheless, two weeks later he tries again.

> To Ezhov, People's Commissar for Internal Affairs of the
> Union of the S.S.R., Commissar General of State Security:
>
> Not having received an answer to my petition sent to you on March 30 deprives me of my hope to get the requested permission to attend church services, if only during one week during Great Lent. Therefore, I refer once again to the reasons quoted in the said petition and hereby submit an additional request to grant me permission to forward to the Most Reverend Metropolitan of Moscow[10] the enclosed letter, in which I ask His Eminence to enable me to read the Gospels and the entire Bible, in order to find spiritual consolation, something I am in much need of, and to gain information regarding certain periods of Church history.
>
> If you agree—and if His Eminence is willing to grant me my request —I beg you to deign to instruct the head of the prison accordingly, that is, to deliver to me the Books I request.
>
> At the same time, I seek once again your permission to allow me the use of paper and pen, if only in order to make brief notations while reading the books delivered from the prison library, so as to facilitate the understanding of what has been read …
>
> April 16, 1938 General Miller

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[10] Metropolitan Sergius [Stragorodskii], official head of the part of the Russian Church that was officially recognized by the Soviet authorities.

Here is that enclosed letter to the Metropolitan, from which one may gather that the hapless general had come to the conclusion that he might be kept in prison until he died.

> Moscow, 16 April, 1938
>
> Your Eminence,
>
> With the leave of the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs I apply to you with the following request. Having been isolated from the outside world I find it particularly painful not to be able to attend church services. The circumstances under which I left home did not allow me to take along even the Gospels [*sadly smiling face here*], the reading of which would be a great consolation, especially at present. I therefore beg you to accept graciously my humblest request to make me a gift of the Gospel in Russian.
>
> I would be deeply grateful if you could also find it possible to give me a Church History, perhaps even one of the textbooks used by the students at seminaries or the Ecclesiastic Academy.
>
> I devote all my time to the reading of books from the local library, but it would be a joy if I could dedicate some of the little time I have left (I am 71) to the renewing and expanding of my knowledge of the Bible and the Lives of the Saints. I dare ask you, Most Reverend Vladyko,[11] to let me have these two books for a period of two or three months; I shall duly return them upon reading them.
>
> I commit myself to your holy prayers, and beseech you, deeply esteemed Vladyko, to believe the sincerity of my gratitude.
>
> Your Eminence's humble servitor, servant of God
>
> Evgenii.

Thus another amazing thematic intersection: General Miller from his Moscow prison implores his captors to give him the Bible; Plevitskaya, in her Rennes prison, uses their family Bible ("in green covers") to pass coded messages (although other sources suggest her husband had used this Bible earlier to inscribe a German code, as he apparently was not only an N.K.V.D. operative but also a Gestapo agent).

The last petition preserved in the folder is the longest. This document, in which innate decency dresses his frustration and stifles sharp anguish (though sometimes a groan slips out), was written apparently in July of 1938. That he still appeals to Ezhov's humanity is ample proof of the General's own ineradicable humanity. The unexpected mention of Pushkin (Mrs. Miller was a granddaughter of Pushkin's widow by her second marriage) must have been a purposely planted side argument devised during long hollow days and nights by a desperate man tortured most of all by the thought of his devastated family. Nineteen-thirty-seven was the centennial of Pushkin's death, for which the rulers began to prepare the Soviet people three years in advance, prodding Pushkin into public life and splashing up an unprecedented campaign, complete with the renaming of many towns, hamlets, streets, and institutions after him over the entire anniversary year. These state-staged fireworks, becoming louder as the anniversary neared, ran parallel and in step with the sharply intensified terror, allowing Pushkin propaganda to overlay and muffle the massacre, much as the rumble of dozens of running bulldozers would drown out the noisy work of the firing squads during regular mass executions in the shooting fields near every Soviet city. General Miller seems to tap, in passing and on the off chance, into the resource of Pushkin's valuable political currency, in order to strengthen his plea on behalf of his wife, an innocent descendant of the poet's wife. We also learn what sort of books the Lubianka prison library let him read: the typical diet of "pre-revolutionaries," plus Lenin. Prison library is another Nabokovian motif, of course.

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[11] Slavonic honorific for a bishop, meaning "Master" or "Lord."

Confidential

To Ezhov,
People's Commissar for Internal Affairs of the Union of the S.S.R.,
Commissar General of State Security

> Ten months have now passed since that ill-starred day when, treacherously lured into the apartment of strangers, I was taken captive by criminal villains in the suburb of Paris, where I lived as a French resident, under the protection of French laws and under the auspices of the Nansen Office of the League of Nations, of which the U.S.S.R. is a member. Not for a single day have I been a citizen of the U.S.S.R., nor have I ever set foot on the territory of the U.S.S.R. Having been immediately blindfolded and tied up—mouth, eyes, hands, and feet—and totally drugged, I was taken, unconscious, on board a Soviet ship, where I came to only 44 hours later, halfway between France and Leningrad.
>
> Thus for my family I disappeared suddenly and without a trace on September 22 of the past year. My family consists of my 67-year-old wife

and three children, aged 38–41. Even though during the first days upon my arrival in Moscow I could scarcely think, still under the influence of an exceptionally strong dose of chloroform, I could clearly understand what a blow, what a shock, what worry my disappearance must have caused my wife and children. My wife, of course, could not have doubted that I was abducted by Soviet agents: the Kutepov precedent was much too memorable, and besides, all those 7 1/2 years since my assuming the post of the chairman of the Union of Joint Russian Warriors, misgivings [*about possible kidnapping*] were many times tossed about, and the situation of a captive of the Sov. organs would be painted invariably in the most horrific colors. This is why my wife must now harbor the worst possible fears about my predicament. This is why my first impulse upon being put in jail was to let my wife know that I was alive and well and thus far physically sound. I handed a brief letter along these lines to the interrogating investigator in early October. As I did not get from him a promise that he would send that letter along, early in November I submitted to the Prison Chief a special petition and with it a brief note of similar content, without mentioning either my name or whereabouts, asking only to affix to my note some intermediate address at which my wife could inform me of her health and of our children's and grandchildren's welfare.

Having received no response whatsoever to that petition of November 4—nor to other petitions of the same date concerning the money belonging to other persons that was stolen from me—I urgently asked you, in our face to face conversation, to put me in touch with my wife in order to reassure her about the conditions of my present situation and to be reassured myself regarding her and the children.

On December 28, following up on our personal conversation, and later in my petitions submitted at the end of March and in April, I reiterated my request, but received no reply.

Ten months have passed, and I [still] know nothing about my family, and my family apparently knows nothing about me.

I understand perfectly well that the zeal "not according to knowledge"[12] of your agents who went so far as to abduct me, breaking all international laws and thus forcing you into a corner, put you and the entire Sov. Government in a difficult position, compelling it to hide my presence in the U.S.S.R. until such time when a suitable way out of this situation could be found. And yet I cannot help appealing to your sense of humanity: what have these completely innocent people done to you

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[12] Romans 10:2.

> that you make them suffer so terribly? My wife and children have never been involved in politics. I am above all worried about my wife's health, as she has suffered all her life from bad nerves, an illness whose painful bouts followed every upsetting or worrisome circumstance. On her maternal side, my wife is a granddaughter of A.S. Pushkin's wife, née Goncharov, whose second husband was [Colonel Petr] Lanskoi, and she has inherited, just as her mother and sisters did, the high-strung nervousness peculiar to the Goncharov family … I am horrified at the thought of the ways my disappearance might have affected her. We have been together forty-one years!
>
> … Never, not in the periods of the most strict repression, neither Radishchev, nor Herzen, nor Lenin—whose biographies I have studied [here] in their collected works, published by the Lenin Institute and the Academy—were deprived of communication with their relatives. Is it really conscionable that the Soviet authorities, having pledged to establish a regime of freedom and inviolable personal rights and having renounced the practice of imprisonment without a trial, will now wish to make me a mediaeval *Prisoner of Chillon* or a new version of the Iron Mask from the times of Louis XIV—all of it to no other purpose than to keep me incognito?
>
> I urgently ask you to consider my request from a humanitarian point of view and put an end to the mental torments that become more unendurable with each day passed. For ten months now I have lived under the great weight of the thought that unwittingly I have perhaps caused my wife's death, only because of the unwary trust in a despicable traitor who was once a hero of the Civil War, serving as he did in the Voluntary Army …
>
> I hope you will find time to respond as well to my other questions and requests expressed in my [previous] petitions and letters. Hoping also that you will look favorably on the foregoing, I, your captive, will await with understandable impatience your decision, as it will soon be a full year since my imprisonment.
>
> 27 July, 1938 General Miller

In his utter dejection, Miller lets his scant guard drop when he calls Skoblin a "hero of the Civil War" who once served in the White Army and now turned into a "despicable traitor"—for a moment losing his grasp on the perverse polarities in the world he was shipped to: after all, his olive-jacketed and harnessed pendragon, sitting a few storeys above him and not five hundred feet away in his enormous office at an enormous desk, with his back to the window giving on the "Iron Felix" Square, deems Miller's heroes traitors and enemies, and Miller's traitors, heroes—untrustworthy, it's true, but such are the dialectics of the class struggle. General Miller was to outlast Peop.com. Ezhov by a month.[13]

4.

Nothing at all is known of the general's life in prison in the ten months that followed his last surviving letter. He seems to have been left to languish on an indefinite life-to-death row until further notice, just as he had supposed. Why they did not kill him straightaway upon having realized that nothing really useful could be extracted from him remains a mystery. Then, of a sudden, the question of his death was decided in a matter of one day, one evening, and this very abruptness and haste, and certain ghastly details of the preparation for the execution, the execution itself, and the disposal of the body remind one of the arrhythmia of the breathless last chapter of *Invitation to a Beheading*.

Kraevsky supposes, not without reason, that the rush had to do with the sharp turn in the Soviet political course: a week before the prisoner in Cell 110 was hastily killed, Litvinov, People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs, who was in favor of an anti-German alliance with England and France, was replaced by Molotov, as the first step towards a pact with Hitler's government and the subsequent partition of Eastern Europe between Germany and the U.S.S.R. Thus, says Kraevsky, even the theoretical possibility of using a kidnapped Russian general as a bargaining chip in some conceivable diplomatic game with France was nullified, and that "sealed the fate of E.K. Miller." It seems far-fetched, but there is no better explanation.

The folder contains three more documents, all dated May 11, 1939. The first two are forms, with the letterhead of the new N.K.V.D. chief and of the Supreme Court's Tribunal, filled out by the same hand in green ink. Kraevsky very plausibly reconstructs the events of this afternoon, "… as Soviet [executive] offices did not function in the morning at the time [*having been adapted to Stalin's night-owl schedule*]. The Peop.com.int.aff. [*narkomvnudel*] Beria—Ezhov had been removed by then—on an urgent order from Stalin or Molotov—for who else could decide Miller's fate!—rushed to his Lubianka office, called in Ulrich [*the infamous chairman of the Supreme Court's Tribunal who rubberstamped countless death sentences in the 1930s*], and the officer on duty filled out the forms at once. Ulrich signed one of them, in the same green ink, Beria put his bossy flourish in red pencil, and the prison commandant was summoned …"

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[13] Arrested on April 10, 1939, shot on February 4, 1940.

Here is a literal translation of these documents.

> 11 May, 1939,[14] no number. *For your eyes only.*
>
> To the Head of the Internal Prison of the G.U.G.B. [The Main
> Administration of State Security] of the N.K.V.D. of the U.S.S.R.
> Comrade Mironov
>
> ORDER
>
> I suggest that you hand over convict Ivanov, Petr Vassilievich,[15] kept under No. 110, to the charge of the N.K.V.D. – U.S.S.R. Commandant comrade Blokhin.
>
> People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the U.S.S.R.
> L. Beria

Below, in another hand and ink: "Convict Ivanov, No. 110, has been handed over to the N.K.V.D. Commandant. Head of the Int. Prison Mironov. 11.V.39." Across the form, in red pencil: "One convict received. Blokhin. 11/V 39."

Here is the second document.

> No. 00180/L.
> To the Commandant of the N.K.V.D. – U.S.S.R. comrade Blokhin.
>
> Hereby you are ordered to carry out immediately the verdict of the Military Tribunal of the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R. served to Ivanov, Petr Vassilievich, sentenced to death by firing squad in accordance with the law of December 1, 1934.[16]
>
> Chairman of the M.T.
> V. Ulrich.

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[14] Uhtkin gives the wrong date for General Miller's execution, November 5—a simple mistake of transposing the day and month the American way (5.11 instead of 11.5).

[15] Thus at the very end the "Iron Mask" motif rhetorically mentioned by Miller suddenly surfaces.

[16] This law prescribed a sharply increased scope and intensity of repression after the murder of Kirov, ordered by Stalin and used as a pretext for the new wave of state terror.

In the margin, there is a line scribbled in semi-literate Russian, which, Kraevsky ventures, was required to re-confirm that they got the right person under the wrong name, to avoid a possible identity mistake: "The handed-over identity Ivanov under No. 110 confirm. Head Int. Prison Mironov. 11/V 39."

The third piece is written by Mironov himself. The subject of the second clause is missing in the original, making it sound as if the *verdict* was burned.

> Deed of Transaction.
>
> The verdict as concerns the said Ivanov, sentenced by the Military Tribunal of the U.S.S.R. Sup.Court was carried out at 23:05 o'clock and at 23:30 was burned at the crematorium, in the presence of:
>
> N.K.V.D. Commandant Blokhin
> Head of Int. Prison G.U.G.B. – N.K.V.D. Mironov
>
> 11/V 39

So the squad consisted of two, one of whom shot Miller probably in the nape of the neck, most likely not in the Lubianka prison's execution space underground, as usual, but the way it was done with extraordinary prisoners—in the crematorium basement, next to the gates of the oven, into which the body would then be thrown.

One will note that Ivan, Petr, and Vassily used to be the three most common Russian names, so the code under which they kept General Miller was of the John Smith variety. One wonders whether Mironov and Blokhin themselves knew exactly whom they were killing.[17]

These three documents are paper-clipped together with both Miller's and Skoblin's letters and put in a blue file within the general folder, which is inscribed: "This material was shown to comrade Abakumov [new Minister of State Security] on March 5, 1949," signed illegibly. All documents pertaining to the case, including the interrogation records, etc., were destroyed after Miller's murder, and the surviving ones translated here were attached to an entirely different case. Kraevsky calls their discovery a miracle, rather than an accident, brought about so that someone might remember *raba Bozhiia*

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[17] Blokhin was Head of the Execution Squads between 1926 and 1952, "the greatest executioner in history" (Michael Parrish, *The Lesser Terror* [Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996], 324). In one month, in March–April 1940, he shot with his Walther pistol nearly 7,000 Polish POWs.

Evgeniia ["servant of God Evgenii," the Slavonic formula for Church commemoration] and pray for his soul's rest.

He was born on September 25, 1867; thus his first day in the N.K.V.D. prison was his seventieth birthday.

His wife, Natalia Nikolaevna (her name and patronymic were the same as those of Pushkin's wife, her grandmother), née Shipov, was born in 1870, married Miller at not quite seventeen, and survived him by six years, never learning exactly what befell her husband.

5.

"The Assistant Producer" is associated with a very strange accident, perhaps a fortuitous mishap, unexampled among Nabokov's publications. The original version in *The Atlantic Monthly* was reprinted in *Nine Stories;* then, beginning with *Nabokov's Dozen*, Nabokov would invariably have it published without the two final paragraphs, thus omitting the jolly scene of General Golubkov's grotesque dismissal, when his displeased oberpuppenmeister shows him the trapdoor—which turns out to be a secret subterranean-and-aquarian passage to California, where we catch the final glimpse of him ruminating his "lucky strike" (*Nine Stories* 95/*Stories* 555 [18]). These two mock-cinematic paragraphs, unlike the rest of the story, are based on the narrator's derisive imagination: it's true that General Skoblin was reported to have been spotted, after his escape from Paris, in Khabarovsk and Barcelona *simultaneously*; but never in Ventura County, as far as I know. In a sense, these two passages are indeed detachable, because, being partly farcical, partly wistful fabrications, they slightly upset the point of the last words of *Nabokov's Dozen* about "actual facts." Of course, the story closed the way it did because Nabokov wanted to make its cinematic ends meet, but I also imagine that he could wittingly let a printer's error stand, on seeing the advantages of a dead end, as it were. Without the last page, "The Assistant Producer" ends right after the three German officers visit Slavska in a hospital and are told that "she [is] dead—which possibly was the truth." That Nabokov could close his piece with this sort of rhetorical clasp can be shown by comparing it with the ending of his *Nikolai Gogol*, written at exactly the same time: "But the other thing—his having been born on the 1st of April—is true" (150). Such a last word makes a much better connection with the quoted last words of the endnotes to

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[18] Dmitri Nabokov restored the missing ending in this posthumous collection, considering it an editorial blunder, which it probably was; but he offers no explanation as to why his father allowed a mistake, which is hard to miss in the first place, to stay in subsequent editions (e.g., *Nabokov's Congeries*).

Nabokov's Dozen about life and art, and thus would duly send the reader back to the first sentence of the story, as any good Nabokovian composition should.

But if Nabokov found that trimmed ending acceptable (a supposition that is difficult to dismiss, knowing that he read his proofs very carefully and nevertheless allowed the truncated version not only to be printed but also reprinted), thus reinforcing the supreme rule of "actual facts" in this story, then it is the much more astonishing to learn its real continuation, along with numerous revisions, and confirmations, of his conjectures. The writer at the end of "The Passenger" sighs over the fact that he, the artist, is "in the dark" as to the possible continuation of a plot: "maybe Life had in mind something totally different, something much more subtle and deep." In the case of the "Assistant Producer" life certainly makes the story pale—but not blush, for in it Nabokov has touched so many of the right keys: the vulnerability of decency, the nobility of suffering for one's principles, the unmistakable mark of evildoing on one's countenance, the faint but irrepressible odor of a burnt conscience.

"Vsevo dvoe i est' — smert' da sovest'," goes the Russian saying quoted by Nabokov's narrating ex-priest. It means, roundly, that, inasmuch as our life here is concerned, "death and inwit are all that's in it." Of the two generals, one kept his conscience clean, while the other gagged and chloroformed his, and both died, probably at about the same time, and thus life, the real art director, may end the last page of a "true story" with a stamp "to be continued"—or not to be.

Endnote

I regret that for technical reasons I cannot reproduce here the most remarkable pictures that are placed with Uhtkin's wanton piece. One can see them at http://versiasovsek.ru/2003/5/weeklyread/1217.html. For those who can't, or who do not read Russian, here is a brief description of the three most relevant ones. (The other two show General Denikin, the Head Commander of the White Armies before Baron Wrangel, who was in Paris at the time of the kidnapping of General Miller and in fact was supposed to be abducted himself, there and then, also through Skoblin's agency. Warned by his instinct and, obliquely, by Sergey Efron, he repeatedly refused to get into Skoblin's car, took instead a train to Brussels, and thus escaped Kutepov's and Miller's fate. He was a prosecution witness at Plevitskaya's trial in December.)

The first is a group picture of the Kornilov Regiment officers, taken in 1921 in Gallipoli, Turkey, where the remnants of the retreating Russian armies were evacuated after the Crimea was overtaken by the Reds. The fourth from the right is Nikolai Skoblin. The priest in a fedora, with a large pectoral cross, is Father Leonid Rozanov, cast as "Fr Feodor" by Nabokov, who certainly had seen that picture (cf. his description of a "worldly priest" with a pectoral cross sitting in the front row in the third chapter of "The Assistant Producer"), as it was printed many times in the émigré press (it is reproduced in Kostikov on page 224).

The second one is a snapshot taken in a Paris street mere days before the abduction. Here General Miller, a tall, rather stout man, stands in three-quarter view, the brim of his hat casting a deep shadow over his eyes, holding what looks like a document folder in his left hand, his right holding the elbow of his wife, who even in this crude picture resembles a little her beautiful grandmother. Beside her stands another lady. But what makes this photograph especially poignant is the figure of General Skoblin in the background, standing at the curb by his motorcar, hatless, thin, balding, casting a long look at his prey from behind.

In the third, we see Nadezhda Plevitskaya in court, standing between her lawyer and a guard, who is seated.

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