

## Charles Bock

### ROOKIE

It was during a day in the month previous to this one that instead of attending school, Ivan Ivar Ivananoff stood at the kitchen sink in the apartment of his mother, where he mixed blueberries and blackberries and cleansing detergent with vanilla shortening, a tube of glue, and also the extract of a dead squid stolen from the fish market. He rubbed this concoction into his thick black hair and scrubbed this potion in past the curls, to their roots, and then beyond, into his scalp. And at first, while it settled, this solution popped, fizzed, it tingled. Then it burned. After rinsing, shaking, and rubbing his head with a towel, Ivan looked into a mirror to discover those tufts and strands which had not come out in the sink or on the towel had, it appeared, turned to seaweed.

"*Jerkinoff*," Spider called Ivan at the playground that day. Ivan ran his hand through what remained of his hair, clinging to his error, half-proud of it, because it was *his* error, after all. His voice, usually flat and cerebral, cracked: "My name is Ivan." "*Jerkinoff*," repeated Spider. And then Alexy, Gregor, even Maximoff—they guffawed and hooted and slapped hands. And they repeated. But, standing behind them all, on the furthest outside of the circle, I froze.

When Ivan and I were each ten years old and watching on television the 1988 Olympiad, we were the ones slapping five, as our hero Arvydas Sabonis slamdunked in the face of Admiral David Robinson. Ivan then leaped from the couch with a pillow extended over his head and recreated the heroic feat. And it was last year, when the generals attempted to take the Kremlin, that Ivan called me up and called me chicken until I agreed to run out with him into the artillery-illuminated night. We tried to get close to the tanks. And were stopped at a roadblock. The soldier who turned us away gave us cigarettes. Ivan smoked every one.

Between us there was a secret handshake and an occasional sleepover and the shared hardships of being the two shortest boys at Pushkin Junior Academy for Accelerated Students. We also shared our math homework, lies about girls, and Kafka, who we both pretended to un-

derstand. And there was also the afternoon when, as we split a plate of his mother's kasha, he raised his chin and laughed triumphantly, that day when, leaning back, balancing on a chair itself balanced on its hind legs, Ivan matter-of-factly explained to me the extended metaphor of the cockroach as man alienated in his society.

So, me, I called him Ivan. I called him Ivan even when he told me not to call him Ivan, later, when my presence and the name I called him elicited only a dull nod.

Now, when *his mother* saw the seaweed, she did not flinch. Her words however came through clenched teeth. "Twenty-two years in the schools of the republic, never one child I taught did such a thing. Never did I see such a thing." Her eyes flashed violence; her arms knotted then uncrossed. "If your dead father saw this he would rise from his grave in Afghanistan, and—and . . ." Sinewy hands balled into fists, then shot open: "*Oh Ivan Ivar, how could you think of this?*"

In time, when Ivan had the distance to properly ruminate on this matter, and also needed something to blame for all that happened to him, he remembered his mother's unabated rage. And he formulated a theorem, which, quite recently, I had the honor of hearing. Ivan believed his hair to be beside the point. Whether green or the oceanic blue he had originally intended, whether an afro or dreadlocks or shaved bald, he felt that all that followed would not have followed if only—no, *not* if she understood, for he did not want her understanding; but if she only had *been able* to understand.

His mother was mourning a husband and raising a son alone and teaching high-school chemistry. This often left her too tired to stand on line for toilet paper or to clean the two-room apartment. She drank potato beer at night while grading papers and usually fell asleep on the couch with those papers on her chest and a red pen in her hand. Until communism's fall, Mrs. Ivananoff was the head of a weekly reading group that did not, in fact, discuss republic-sanctioned literature, but instead collected clothes and funds for the widows of exiles. This club was two years functioning when her esteemed husband, Ivan's father, an associate professor at the university, "volunteered" for the infantry to prove he was not involved with the printing of an underground newspaper.

For a century, if in any way one were to advocate change, the eyes of the Supreme Soviet were watching, threatening, setting the stakes and the aftermath of not just that individual's existence, but *the existence of that entire family*. Therefore, any unhappiness, any forms of rebellion, any declaration that *life should be different than this*, had to be made in *precise, covert, and direct political action*.

As for the train of thought which allowed for rebellion *simply as a declaration of self-expression*—well, such a frivolous concept, such an *American* concept, simply was *not comprehensible* within Mrs. Ivananoff's paradigm, or, for that matter, the paradigm of anyone raised under the Supreme Soviet.

However, said Ivan, scarcely able to control his excitement, explaining this to me as if it were headline news, the Supreme Soviet is now two years dismantled.

Now, Ivan told me, he is a feeling person. And though the burgeoning-pubescent in him revelled in his mother's anger and was proud of himself for causing it, a deeper, more ingrained part of his psyche wanted to fall into her slender arms, to join her horror with his own, admit his mistake and laugh about it, to take her shoes off and massage her swollen feet. But, he explained, he could not: no, for this was entirely different from anything he had known or felt. This was the kiss of God on his brow. My friend was sure that his hair, this confrontation, and the incidents to follow were merely moments of a groundswell, small parts of movements both economic and social that he deemed inevitable, matters of fate, their seeds planted a hundred years back, no, further, five hundred years, when Ivan the Terrible still rampaged and three wooden ships sent sail from Spain, their navigator scoffing at the idea of falling off the edge of a paper world.

"What would your father say?" Mrs. Ivananoff screamed, pinching the boy-fat of his cheeks and pulling at his green head. "*What?*"

"Why don't we call him and ask?"

For an instant she did not move. And then her grip on him became harder. She dragged him to the door.

"I TELL YOU WHAT—YOU GO FIND HIM! YOU GO FIND HIM AND ASK! YOU ASK, YOU JERKINOFF!"

He was sleeping on the streets, he was in prison, he joined a para-trooper militia; he was a mobster, a pervert, a warlock, things more bizarre. I cannot substantiate or deny these rumors. Four days after his expulsion, a new student took his seat in class—a girl from France, a girl who sometimes did not cross her legs while in that seat, and who also had America Online. Three times, I saw Mrs. Ivananoff standing outside her chemistry classroom—always she was smoking, her face harrowed, her mannerisms jittery. I never considered crossing the hallway to greet her. I did witness Ivan hanging around the basketball courts in the playground a few times. The bruise on his cheek had faded. His cheeks themselves were no longer chubby, his stare no longer lively. A sunburn and gradual, building layers of squalor coated his face. Even that Chernobyl-ish exclamation point of hair had turned matted and nappy. The first times I saw him, I called his name. Only the first times. You want the opinion of Alexander Pupick on what happened to him those weeks between then and today, simple—my former friend gradually changed into a cockroach.

The Cockroach phoned me earlier today.

Hours before contacting me, Jerkinoff moved across the wide stone foundation of Red Square, the Krasnaya Ploschad, that area where so many tanks and missiles once paraded with regularity, and where, now, nascent skateboarding enthusiasts practice tricks. He walked in the fat shadow of Istorichesky Museum, and became tangled amid a seated half-circle of cross-legged and androgynous teens, a few strumming guitars, the rest nodding. My former friend then changed direction, slicing and darting through the congestion of tourists, swiveling his torso, turning sideways, all but pouring himself into any crevice: his body thin and light as hope itself, his baggy jeans fluttering with each step, his rancid T-shirt covering him like a dress, so oversized that a doppelgänger could fit in the cloth which flapped behind. And those locks . . . I wonder, was it the arrogance of not caring what anyone thought of him that energized his stride, or, perhaps he wanted people to notice that he did not notice them noticing him? Either way, the row of men who waste every afternoon on park benches did not look up from their chess boards. As he had throughout the crossing, Jerkinoff whispered, “Sensemilia, hashish, speedballs.” His already weighted words

became further warbled by the American pace he tried to affect. "Ecstasy. Dust from angels."

Tourists always are waiting on the steps of Lenin's Tomb, captives to the zealots who proselytize and wave pamphlets at them. Reaching an open area a few meters from the back of the line, Jerkinoff stopped. He stared at the line for a moment, then reached into his jeans, pulling out a small, mush-colored ball-sack, which he promptly dropped. A smoothly moved foot, and the sack balanced perfectly on the inseam of the size eight Soviet-issue army boots that his mother could not throw out (true of all his deceased father's belongings. Hmm . . . I am curious whether it is now true of Ivan's as well). As Jerkinoff softly kick-tapped the ball, the gawky collection of angles that, in the previous seconds, comprised his form now moved in lithe, smooth symmetry: one, two, three times with this side of his boot, with that side. The sack popped into the air, descended, was caught and balanced once more, this time on a leg posed in a martial-arts lightning strike. Jerkinoff stared at the line to see if anyone was watching. Wiggled eyebrows accompanied his warbled hiss: "Hash—*shit!*"

As the ball fell from his boot, Jerkinoff's body became a blur, an explosion of cloth and denim; his form contorted, wildly stabbing at and managing to hit the sack with his heel, almost saving it from the ground.

Now, did it really matter if he did not save the sack from the ground, if he appeared as a misfit, or if the old men would not look up from their chess boards at him? No. Not as soon as that one collegiate-type left the line, then turned back and shouted in American for his friend to save his place. Once this happened, Jerkinoff explained to me, his shenanigans had served their purpose.

"Bum a smoke?" the American asked.

Jerkinoff used his foot to jostle the sack to life, and then to kick it upwards. He smoothly swiped the ball from the air and placed it back in his jeans. He examined this newcomer. And he had to take pains to keep hope's glimmer out of his eyes. Stretched across a chest slightly higher than Jerkinoff's eyes was the logo for the World Champion Chicago Bulls. The gold hoop in the American's ear, along with his short blond hair and trim goatee, accentuated small, smashed facial features—a pug nose, fat eyes, and puffed lips glistening with some sort of balm.

At the end of a rippled arm, muscular to the point of stretch marks, the American held a paperback—its cover worn and maroon, with small yellow letters in the center.

Jerkinoff produced a pack of unfiltered cigarettes from his pocket. He plucked one and held the cigarette a few centimeters from his puckered mouth. A wink to the American, and then, with a roll of his tongue back in his throat, a flick. The steel tongue-stud grazed the back of his lower front teeth.

Orange-reddish streaks flashed, igniting the immediate air around him, a gaggle of fireflies suddenly unleashed and free and capable of anything.

Jerkinoff's first instinct was to lead the American towards St. Basil's Cathedral. However, he later explained to me, police habitually ride roughshod over the shantytown of homeless there, and he couldn't take any chances. He also decided against going to the playground: best not to run into any of the fellows this day. No. Not now. Not with this one. And so it was down Manezhnaya Road, turning onto a quaint path in Alexandrovsky—The Sad Alexander Gardens, past acacia and eucalyptus trees, chrysanthemum beds, and gooseberry bushes. Within five minutes, they reached the bathroom facility. As they walked, Jerkinoff did not answer the American's small-talk questions. He did not comment when the American volunteered information concerning his visit, or give way on the path to anyone passing in the opposite direction—not that Ivan normally would do such things, but today he did not do them for reasons different than his usual ones. Today, the fireworks had left a numbness in Jerkinoff's gums and teeth, a pain in his tongue so resonant, so penetrating that only two things could keep him from breaking into sobs. *No, Ivan, no*, he told himself, eliminating the pharmaceutical option, *I need my senses, right now my head must be screwed on straight*. Without betraying his pain or his plans or the adrenalin surging through him, Jerkinoff led the American off the path, directing him around the back of the bathroom, where graffiti demanded the death of Yelstin, the rebirth of Stalin, and the eternal reign of Nirvana, where fir trees and ferns hid individuals who wished to be hid, and a thick pine scent dwarfed not only any traces of urine but other aromas also.

Jerkinoff took out the ball-sack and pulled at its hidden zipper and revealed his stash. The American tapped the paperback against his leg nervously. With his other hand, he took a drag on his cigarette. His fat eyes focused on the thickly crammed baggies.

And then there was a dull hum. A droning that became progressively louder. Jerkinoff rezipped his sack. The American glanced at him, then towards the humming, and for a moment, the two of them had an unspoken conversation concerning whether to flee. My friend then did the only thing that made sense to him. He started kicking at his sack. The American joined in, playing a makeshift game to the approaching hum's tune.

Appearing from down the path, a speck; a speck which gradually took shape as a man; a curved and elderly man. Jerkinoff occasionally glanced towards the oncomer; chills took his neck.

The old man was bald, wide at the hips, and wore a crumpled workshirt tucked into brown pants. Jerkinoff could see stained yellow at the man's armpits and also along his tight cardboard collar, where red veins bulged. Visible through the tight white workshirt was the outline of an undershirt.

This old fucking man then stopped at the fir tree meters from them, imposing his presence upon them. They were the only three people within a hundred kilometers. He hummed a bar from a military tune. He picked at a far branch, snapped a twig, contemplated its grooves, all while the boys kicked at their little sack of drugs, their lives now most definitely depending on their nonchalance.

After a few more bars and a few more snapped branches, the old man looked at the boys once more, then at the leaves on the ground. He put his hands in his pockets and his shoulders slouched even further. He turned and hummed his tune and waddled away, into the far trees. Soon the humming faded and was replaced by the carrying, slight sound of crushed leaves, the song of unseen birds.

"Oh shit." The American rubbed his goatee with the book. His eyes glanced towards the distance and back. "Are we fucked?"

"Too old," Jerkinoff mumbled. "What have we done besides?"

"What'd you say?"

Jerkinoff did not answer—already, he told me, he was thinking: not only of that old man, but also how to salvage this scene. The American

dragged on his cigarette, then shot streams of smoke out of his nose. The American ground his cigarette against the paperback's maroon cover, then flicked the butt to the ground. "Hey. I don't want to go to the Gulag over a dime bag." Jerkinoff only ran his hand through his hair, rolled his tongue in his mouth. "Yo? Dude? Does the word *Siberia* mean anything to you? Yo? Listen, I can just score from one of the other dudes. You know, outside the hotel or by the Bolshoi—"

"I will give you half of an ounce, pure African hashish, for the *Catcher in the Rye*," said Jerkinoff, speaking low and fast and taking great effort to enunciate each word. "And one tab of Ecstasy for the Chicagobulls shirt."

"Dude, you don't want —"

"Fuck your money." Quickly, Jerkinoff stripped out of his shirt and placed it in the American's hand. "Come, we switch before anyone else passes." Despite the pain through every tooth, the numbness on his lips, a wave of nervous energy carried him; his words came freely. "Hey, you have more shirts like this? You have jeans? Calvin Klein? Magazines? Cassette music? Wait—allow me to see the wear on your sneaker bottoms. Nikes, no?"

As Jerkinoff spoke, he could feel the American's eyes drawn to his slight torso and the tattoo surrounding his right nipple. No, not a tattoo, not ink, a scorching, pink scars, charred flesh glowing on a body otherwise permeated with pre-adolescence—his chest concave, upper torso bare of any traces of muscle, fat, hair or acne. He could feel the American thinking, *Damn, this little punker with his squeaky voice and his cold eyes, he got himself branded*. It was then, I imagine, that the American was overcome, sympathetic and horrified and intrigued. Though he originally wandered off line to check out the little punker because it was goofy enough to find punkers in his hometown of Beaverton, Oregon, let alone to find them in Russia; though he only originally considered scoring for the sake of Bridget Brady, who he wanted thinking daring and dangerous thoughts of him, and, who, so far, had occupied the aisle seat across from him three times on train rides (he hoped number four would occur in two hours, when their tour went off to St. Petersburg); though he had smoked dope just three times in his eighteen years, all at parties when he already was drunk, still, the American found himself saying, "Our tour lasts a week. I brought plenty of gear—"



Jerkinoff grabbed the American by the back of his stout neck and drew close. "I can supply you," he whispered. "Your whole trip. Meet me here, Alexandrovsky—Sad Alexander Garden. Three hours. You will be in this bathroom. You will sit in the middle stall of this bathroom. You will go to your hotel and fill a satchel with the items you want to sell and be here in three hours. You will lock the stall door and not let anyone in and sit there with the satchel. No jokes about Gulags and Siberia. You are in peril to be doing this and cannot be caught. We will, we must have code words so one is to know it is the other. Yes . . . so you know it is me on the outside of the stall, I will tell you . . . ah—'*See you later, masturbator.*' And so I know it is you on the inside of the stall, you will then respond . . . yes, you will say, '*After a while, pedophile.*'"

The American gave a nervous laugh, started to speak, then swallowed. Jerkinoff, so focused his eyelids were twitching, did not notice.

"Masturbator. Pedophile. Three hours. Remember. Anyone discover us, *anyone*—we are dead."

There are many reasons I took so long to get to the playground after he called. He talked quite rapidly, using many slurs and fragments and unfinished thoughts, and also the phone connection was crappy—why, the only word I immediately recognized was his first—my last name . . . Pupick. After that, much figuring was necessary to interpret and reconstruct his meaning, simply to figure that Jerkinoff wanted to meet me. And once I had decoded that much, what else could I do but call his poor mother, Mrs. Ivananoff? Who immediately launched into her own diatribe, one more slurred, which I could not reconstruct. (Apparently, Mrs. Ivananoff had taken to drinking in the afternoons.) Also, I had to rouse Papa from the classifieds to ask for subway fare. And before he would let me get the money from his dresser bureau, I had to show him my homework was finished, so, first, I had to finish my homework. Then Papa said I should clean my room, and, once that was completed, that perhaps I should wait until Momma came home from waiting on food lines—because he had to do laundry and then get to his night job and this way mother would know where I was. Though much begging finally convinced Papa a note would provide this final service, and I was granted access to his bureau, I then missed my subway train.

And yet, these are trivialities in comparison to my frantic tear—through my closet, stripsheeting my bed, searching for my most prized possession: a faded blue T-shirt from the Freeport McNamara Corporate Golf Challenge Weekend in Pass Christian, Mississippi. For I needed that shirt most of all. Though I am now a size Medium and it is a Small, it brings me much respect on Moscow playgrounds. Such a piece of clothing would cost much through the black market, and I possess it only through the kindness of a visiting uncle. Only this shirt, my Freeport McNamara Corporate Golf Challenge shirt, would do for meeting with Ivan the Warlockroach, Ivan the Paratrooping Pervert, Ivan the Mysterious Jerkinoff.

But father had plunged it into the sink for washing.

Perhaps such matters influenced me when I saw the wallet lying open in his bureau. I do not like to think about this. I am not a psychologist.

Jerkinoff lingered at a tree by the station. Red cloth hung from his shoulders like drapes, falling well below his knees, the bright letters of the two-time NBA champions team logo disrupted by air-ridden folds and partitions. Black sneakers were like clown shoes on him and the seaweed of hair was all but dead, now colorless and squalid, with dread knots and kinks festering there. Jerkinoff's face was an unhealthy umber, his expression empty, his eyes glassy with deep rings underneath. A transparent, pasty film clung to the corners of his cracked and black-tinged lips. After I crossed to the tree to meet him, he surprised me with our secret handshake. I tried not to notice the filth underneath his fingernails. "You are late," he said.

He looked around as if searching for someone else, then started towards the metal mesh fence which frames the basketball courts. The massive sneakers slowed him, made his every step a struggle, as if trudging through mud. I followed, not knowing what to say—I was confused, a bit scared, wondering if perhaps he was on some sort of pharmaceutical substance. And then, with no indication or the slightest glance, he said, "They screw you. Even in the way they structure the week. They fuck you." Now he turned to me, looked me in the eyes, his brow menacingly set, his gaze a desperate thing. Like a lizard, his tongue flicked to his lips and I saw, barely and for the first time, the tip of

silver steel. "They mean to fuck you. If only they supplied you with the stash on Friday instead of Monday, eh? You could then work through the weekend—the major days of commerce. Afterwards, you would know. You would figure how much product you had to move in the rest of the week. Meet your quota. You would be organized. Have perspective. Room to breathe. Room to think. But the bastards do not want you to breathe or think. No. They want you broke. They want you scared. Do not meet your quota, you do not get advanced next week's stash. You do not get paid. Only get paid from remainder when quota has been subtracted from gross. You follow? You see what I am telling you? Quotas are set rat-bastard high, week is structured so big selling days must bail you out rather than set pace. One *must* work seven days a week, ten hours a day—just to make anything. Anything at all. And this is how they want it. This is why those bastards give you the drugs on Monday."

His glare was so piercing that I could not return it. "I know exactly what you mean about people keeping you down," I said, focused on the three-on-three game taking place on the other side of the court, following the queer bounce of an overinflated rubber balloon. "If you had any idea how hard it was for me to get out of the house, then—well . . . ah . . . who pierced your tongue? Did it hurt?"

He grunted and increased the pace of his clomping and moved ahead of me, reaching the fence's gate first and letting the door shut behind him. I noted the slight but paid it no attention. When I caught up with him at the water fountain, he stood staring emptily at the thin trickle which coated the side of its rusted spout. He released the faucet handle with a fling and we started across an empty half-court of asphalt, towards a picnic table where, in previous times, we spent those afternoons when no one would choose us to play in games. "I read that in China they commit suicide by piercing the tongue," I said.

"You need new sneakers."

"Two major arteries rest there. Apparently, if either is punctured, the river of blood suffoca—"

"I felt nothing," he said, raising his tone. "Two shots of vodka, a tab of Ecs, felt nothing. Does that satisfy you?"

An ungainly jump-shot; the ball bounced off a crooked, un-netted rim, puttering beyond the reach of the players. I seized the opportunity

and ran the ball down. Before throwing it back, I tried a between-the-legs dribble.

"Sorry," I yelled, again setting after the rolling orange, my head lowered, my eyes staring at the cracked asphalt as I ran.

When again safe at Jerkinoff's side, I cursed the cheap, lopsided, rubber ball and said that the only way you can dribble on an outdoor court is with a synthetic leather ball and it did not matter anyway because when I was fully grown and had a five meter vertical leap, no one would laugh then. Also, I asked if he had seen Suzy Mezzinkinsky because her breasts had become big and ripe as grapefruits.

"You want to buy these?" Jerkinoff asked.

"But . . . you just saw . . . I am not much of a player."

"Everyone has Nikes."

"If everyone jumped off K— Bridge, would I?"

"If they were wearing Nikes then you would not need to." He laughed. "Just drag the river. Find a corpse with size sevens. You would then be very stylish and have reason to live."

Jerkinoff stared at me with something more than a stare, a leer: pressing, urging and bullying me. I became aware of myself as his eyes must have viewed me. My head flushed, an embarrassment gnawed my belly. I tried to speak but stammered.

Now, it is a fact that if you insert an idea into a fixed system and let it run, this idea must eventually find a natural limit to what it can do within that system. Perhaps it will not be able to sustain itself and will die. Perhaps it can only sustain itself at a small level. Eventually, this idea will, no, it *must*, find its limits, its place. Such is the natural order of things.

It also is a natural order that environments are not permanent, that boundaries are made to be crossed; therefore, eventually, if the idea is strong enough to survive for a long enough time, it will mutate and adapt and push at its place—and this idea will break into a new realm of what is possible, what it can affect; then, inevitably, so long as it is strong enough to handle the task—a new boundary as well.

But—and this is the question I then faced in the playground—can that idea be *forcibly stopped* before reaching its natural conclusion? And if you do successfully stop that idea, is your forcible stoppage the ending point of that notion? Have you altered fate—or merely temporarily

derailed that idea, sent it back to a smaller environment, for another to pick up when the time is right?

Perhaps it is an error to explain my hesitancy through a theorem copied from my junior school philosophy text. Perhaps my error was in dealing with the idea that something nefarious was happening to my friend as opposed to *the physical reality of Ivan Ivananoff, himself, the person in front of me*. For it is true that any individual can take an idea and do with it what they will. And perhaps this is what makes ideas so interesting in the first place.

Or, perhaps, it is what makes the people who enact the ideas so important.

But this is babble. For Ivan Ivananoff did not call me to the playground to bully his former friend into purchasing an oversized, unneeded, and useless pair of sneakers.

He called me to the playground to purchase *Catcher in the Rye*.

Though few in Russia have ever seen a copy, it is common knowledge that Americans hold *Catcher in the Rye* sacred, and, upon its publishing, Mister James Dean Salinger was forced into seclusion. It is also well documented that many American celebrities and statesmen are shot regularly in post offices because of explicit orders in the text. Now Jerkinoff placed it in my hands. On the inside of its flimsy cardboard cover, jagged and terse lines of blue formed Mike Cardigan's name, the last and only legible name in a long list—all the others had been scribbled over or through. In the upper right corner, an eraser had not completely rid the trace of a penciled 1.50. The book's pages were jaundiced; many were dog-eared, others covered in banana and flamingo fluorescence, still others marked in the margins with doodles, hearts, and four-letter words. As I flipped through, I could not help but be aware of Jerkinoff's eyes examining me, gauging me for the slightest reaction. Revulsion took me. Then a wariness. And then I resolved that Jerkinoff would not get the best of me.

The killing orders were not in the first words, nor the first line. My eyes hurriedly followed from former to latter, from what should have been the end of the first sentence to the transitional clause that stretched the thought, and then to the next stretch of thought, and as they did,

my excitement and wariness were gradually replaced by an immersion within, a subservience to the rhythm of the author's mind. Upon nearing the bottom of the first page, I felt Jerkinoff's gaze over my shoulder. A page later, he grabbed the book from me.

"Where did you get it?" I asked.

"Out of my ass. Why do you care?"

"You pulled a shirt and sneakers and such a book from your ass. What do you eat? What drugs do you take? Tell me so I too can start shitting such things." I looked directly into his reddened and quickly narrowing eyes, watched his face disappear behind a mask of delicate stone. "It was a mistake you made in trying to sell me the shoes first. It tells me you need money. I hold the upper hand in our bargaining." I could not help but smile. "See, I am not such a rookie as you think, Ivan Ivananoff."

He pursed his lips. I thought he would hit me, but could not stop looking at him, could not stop smiling. And then *his mouth* thinned into a tight smile. And then not so tight. He arched his back and rested his head on the back of the bench, availing himself to the coolness of twilight, to the sunset, that peacock-tail of warm and teasing promises which never need be answered. Perhaps he was reminded of our past together, perhaps he was surprised at my cleverness, the fact I dared question him; perhaps he was simply happy for company and conversation and perhaps he simply appreciated the appearance of each sunset, understood that it is an answered promise in itself. Whatever his reasoning, for the first time since Ivan Ivar Ivananoff had been a student, he allowed a glimpse beyond the armor of disdain which protected him; his mouth opened like a man allowed to breathe the outside air after so many months in a solitary confinement box.

But the laugh was nervous . . . awkward . . . forced and overdone—as if he was trying to remember how to laugh, or . . . to imitate the ease of friendship.

And in these moments I saw the infection, the swollenness and greenness.

And I made myself sit there as if his tongue was normal; I bit my own tongue.

"Pupick," he said, feeling on a strand of his nappy dead seaweed, "I tell you what. For you, Pupick, I will make exception. I will accept

rubles.” He smirked and twirled the strand around his finger and then leaned forward, hovering over the book in his lap. “Fifty thousand.” He looked around. Darkness’s preamble chords carried throughout the area, the basketball goal was now a vague blur, the game in front of us sloppy and unskilled. Shadows in crisscross configuration stretched along the asphalt. Our surroundings seemed like nothing more than a giant cage to me. He asked if I had a watch. A girl passed in shorts and a T-shirt. She has a watch, I said.

“Nice nipples,” Jerkinoff called out.

Screaming and epithets carried from the water fountain. Two teens. Thrown objects. An old man, scurrying, pushing through the mesh door. His slow waddle down the road, the teens screaming again. I remember that Ivan studied the figure’s disappearance longer than I did. That the teens then came our way, calling *Jerkinoff*. I remember that with the first call, there was an instant where I thought Ivan would run. Instead, he methodically picked the paperback from his lap. While observing the approach of the boys, Jerkinoff reached around his body, sliding the book inside the natural crevice at the small of his back, where it lodged, hidden and supported by his belt of dock rope. He then put his elbows on his knees, crouched his back forward and held his head low. He drew in his cheeks, as if sucking on a hard candy.

“Why are you not working the square?” asked the first boy—who I recognized from school as Spider. His companion’s fly was undone. The Fly set a thick hand on Jerkinoff’s shoulder. Spider walked around the bench, taking a position directly behind the sitting, motionless Ivan. Spider then placed *his* hand on Ivan’s opposite shoulder. The roach was cornered, held underneath by his fellow insects. Jerkinoff’s eyes focused ahead and blinked steadily while his captors took pains to discuss him in casual fashion:

—I told you, comrade.

—You did.

—I said that all Jerkinoff needed was a change of scenery.

—And am I not now responding that you appear correct in what you told me?

—Yes, yes you are. Thank you. But tell me comrade, isn’t it astonishing how the simple change of scenery has led to Jerkinoff’s complete reversal of attitude?

—Why . . . I suppose I might call it astonishing. Although I find it more astonishing that his change of scenery has also caused a complete reversal of fortune.

—So it is! Look at how he looks!

—Why, I recall weeks ago when we gave him our couch to stay on. He did not nearly look so impressive.

—Nor those many afternoons this rookie spent in our hospitality watching wrestling and pornography videos.

—Remember how our ragged rookie talked so big—discoursing from that couch about freedom and commerce and philosophy.

—And did our rookie not convince us to let him play with our ball for three weeks?

—And has not our boisterous rookie failed to hit for the average in *every week* of the three weeks?

—Why, comrade, remind me, how much money is it we now have carried him along for?

—Oh, don't worry. I am confident we cut to the quick of *that* matter.

—Yes. You certainly hammered your point home that day, Fly.

—But that was before the change of scenery. That was before Jerkinoff could afford idle time.

—And before he could afford clothing with the names branded on the chest.

—All stemming from a change of scenery.

—Imagine.

At various points during their dialogue, the insects, and Ivan also, acknowledged my presence with quick glances and low looks, eventually deciding that I was no threat, not worth effort. Or secrecy. And so I played the self-conscious spectator, sitting through a movie I did not completely understand, a movie that terrified me, for the simple reason that there was nothing better to watch. And then, in these next moments, as Spider said, "*Or . . . perhaps . . .*" as his hand traversed Ivan's shoulder, moved onto Ivan's skull and into his hair, as I could feel Ivan's body tensing next to mine, my own fear and interest increased.

"Perhaps he is selling the fancy clothing?"

"Perhaps he is selling the fancy clothing—to finance another change of scenery."

And then it was four hands moving upon Ivan's skull. Not smothering or suffocating. A prod on the cheek. A pinch behind the ear.



Spider ran his hand down Ivan's throat: "Jerkinoff is jerking us."

Fly jabbed at Ivan's chin: "Such piercing analysis!"

They leaned close to him now: "But what do you say to all this, comrade?"

"Perhaps the Fly got your tongue?"

It was then the apple in Ivan's throat bobbed. And a notion came to me, an image, and then other images, remembrances connected to ideas connected to words and phrases.

In retrospect, he must have been in a chair. Seated in a chair in their apartment. Ivan is tiny so they could have any of their companions hold his arms. But it must have been a strong one at the back of his head, someone who could yank on his scalp and overcome his struggling and keep his skull firmly in place while the back of Ivan's neck boiled with sweat. And this is how they did it. I know it is. I know they did not tie him down or use machinery. For that is not how people such as this teach lessons. I can see Ivan helpless and struggling in spite of his helplessness—and that bastard Fly at his side, yanking on Ivan's jaw, pulling his mouth apart barely wide enough for barely long enough, prying, shoving, forcing, into the far corners of his mouth, a battery, a golf ball, small objects which would wedge the jaw apart . . . I clearly see him holding the nape of Ivan's neck with one hand, trying to keep him from struggling, choking him and smacking him, all of them now, the four of them working to subdue him while the corners of his mouth went sore from staying pried open. And I understand with a completeness in which I previously never understood anything before—that sonofabitch Fly, yes . . . he is the one who took the make-shift piercing stud fashioned from a safety pin, the one who held it to a lighter until it was white hot; yes. As Spider yanked on Ivan's teeth, pulling with all his might to open Ivan's jaw as wide as possible, it had to be Fly who reached in and grabbed the tip of Ivan's tongue and took that white hot needle end and jabbed it into the middle of Ivan's dermal layer. And then, as Ivan's screams and cries echoed and his eyes shut so hard they hurt and the tears ran in his face and his jaw spasmed, Fly grabbed a hammer.

And if the insects' jabs and prods now allowed me clues to this understanding, then what was their effect on Ivan? He remained frozen on the park bench, breathing softly, looking down. Above us, the in-

sects giggled to one another. Night rendered their faces unreadable and I perched forward on the bench's edge, ready for . . . for what I did not know. When they told Ivan that later tonight they would settle with him for good, I surprised myself—and said nothing. When they mussed his hair once more, my surprise continued. I did not so much as breathe when Fly and Spider turned, when they left through the gate, or when they called out as goodbye: "*Tonight, Jerkinoff.*" The next moment and the next, as Ivan unleashed a hard gust of air, as he sheepishly ran his shivering hand through his hair, I sat, my hand in my pocket, fingering the stolen money. The bounce of basketball on asphalt rang out in hollow, violent echoes. The game's players passed us. Again, the gate creaked.

"They are too late."

His words were muddled, almost indecipherable. He inhaled deeply through his nose and glanced at me, then down, looking at nothing, addressing no one. "I will have my shipment. The American student is bringing it. Minutes from now. Ha on them. *Ha.* Calvin Klein. Perry Ellis. I will make much money." He clasped his hands together; his thumbs moved rapidly in circles. "They fixed me so I cannot go home but the bastards will not touch me again. If I have goods the consumers worship then the consumers worship me. I sell everything and I have enough money and then I am gone and they cannot touch me again. I will get out. I will. I will go to Chechnya. I will be a mercenary. I hear you get to rape many women there." He winced and took a breath and collected the unravelling threads of his mind. "Where is the money, Pupick? I told you to bring—"

"I? I . . . so much? How could I—"

"That is not my concern. You know, Mr. Dasdemitri the English teacher. I can sell the book to him. I can sell it to many—"

"What happens when the Americans pass customs and have none of the clothes they came in?"

"Fuck them." Hands lunged at me, exploding and spasming in the air. "*Pupick!* I do not have the time . . ." Widened palms shook. "Either you want them or . . ." He paused and wiped his nose on his wrist. "*Don't you understand what I am facing?*"

He needed to make a sale. He needed to talk to someone. He had not talked to someone in a long time. We once had between us basket-

ball and Kafka, small bodies and large hopes. And now he needed to escape. He needed to make a sale. And so he told me what he was facing. He told me more: his morning and his evening, the tonsorial pyrotechnics and the drug buy, his theories of the world and what those bastards did to him—all of which I have tried to accurately convey here. He told me other things as well, matters concerning his weeks in Moscow's underbelly, matters I shall perhaps communicate another time. And he told me that when he saw the book in the American's hand, he thought of me.

He was hurt and sick and scared and lonely and desperate for money and I had ten thousand rubles in my pocket.

I do not know if I could have jewed him down. I did not try to find out. For the first time in my life, I was put in the position where I could be cruel.

I told him I did not have any money.

I still hope to read *Catcher in the Rye* someday. I very much would like to know what it is about.

After the subway took me home, mother screamed that she did not raise a thief and father was sure to whip me once he got off work and I should go straight to my room, where I now lie, putting today's activities onto this paper. But before these things happened, I spent five-thousand rubles at McDonald's on a stale Big Mac and cold fries which I threw out without finishing, for I had misplaced my appetite. And before that occurred, I walked halfway from the playground to the subway station, intending to go home, then turned around and went to Sad Alexander Gardens, outside the bathroom . . . where I watched through a window:

Jerkinoff knocked on the middle stall and called the password and waited for the American Mike Cardigan, who, in those very moments, was most likely hurtling towards St. Petersburg at a hundred and fifty miles an hour, locked in that train's bathroom, passing a toke to Bridget Brady. As Jerkinoff's rapping continued and he repeated "Masturbator! Masturbator!" a bald man with brown slacks and white shirt entered the dingy area. The old man slowly proceeded to the row of urinals, where he stood for a time, humming lowly, his head turned towards the stalls, watching, like me, as Jerkinoff pushed open the middle door and

saw what he already knew to be true. Jerkinoff then slammed the door shut and the force of his action rebounded the door towards him and he slammed it again. And again. Breathing heavily and coughing, he slowly dragged himself and his clown shoes back across the bathroom, passing the row of urinals and the old man without noticing them. Jerkinoff then stopped at the sink, ran the water, and splashed it into his face. He placed both arms on the sink's edge and leaned on it for support, slouching, defeated, gasping and fighting back tears and staring at his reflection in the dirty mirror.

The old man walked behind Ivan, stood behind him and stared at Ivan's reflection in the mirror. An erect and veined penis protruded through the opening in his brown polyester trousers, gnarled fingers clasped around its engorged, purple knob.

Ivan lifted his chin and watched the old man behind him in the mirror, saw those wide, questioning eyes. My friend's face was damp and dirty, frail, his mouth askew. A spittle line of blood hung from his lower lip. Chest heaving, he focused on the mirror's image of the old man and stayed focused on it, and then his arms left the support of the sink and moved onto his own torso, hugging himself, containing, consoling. "You have money?" Ivan asked, looking away, fighting back tears. He straightened his posture. He wiped his mouth and nose on his wrist. "Follow me."

Had I only bought the book. Had I given Ivan my money. Had I been moral enough a person to stop him, to stop them. Had Ivan turned and beaten the old pervert senseless and robbed him and run away. Instead, Ivan quickly turned and started towards the bathroom's exit. The senior stuffed his erection back into his pants. Still buckling his belt, he trailed Ivan, looking at him as if he wished he knew what to say, as if he was ashamed of himself for what they were about to do, as if he could not wait one more second before Ivan sank to his knees. Out of the bathroom and then out of the garden. I followed. I heard the confusion in the old man's voice as he asked where they were going, what was happening. Ivan did not answer. Ivan clunked along in his heavy sneakers, moving two paces ahead of the old man, walking two blocks, three blocks, into the warehouse district. The two turned onto Kitai Gorad, and headed down a row of darkened industrial buildings, a street alive, dappled with young men—some laughing, embrac-

ing one another, others crossing from one building to the next. Each building pulsed with some sort of intrinsic life, laser flashes and driving music, strobe-light reflections in long windows and potbellied door-men in leather chaps.

“After a while, pedophile,” Ivan said. Promptly, he turned to leave.

“What? What is this? What are these places? I do not understand.”

But my former friend did—I saw, as he turned and looked back, ready to answer and then abandon the old man, I saw in his face, an understanding, an empathy, that I believe can only come in the aftermath of one’s virginal attempt at reaching for the world. In these moments, I saw things I hope never again to see, let alone to experience: what it was to be a heartbreak to your mother and an anecdote to one you’ve trusted, a cockroach, an exploiter, a failure, a piece of ass . . . a Jerkinoff. And, yet, there was something else in his face as well, a deeper quality, one foreign to my understanding. This quality, this whatever it was, it spread through the air, palpably overwhelming these final moments before he disappeared into the crisp and lonely night to find new systems to invade and new barriers to crash. And, in these final seconds, as hope’s embers flickered in his eyes and tears ran down his cheeks, Ivan Ivar Ivananoff ended this chapter of his life with a choke and a swallow and a widening of his hands. Then, as if reaching for the world once more, he mumbled: “What’s to understand? You are free. Do as you wish.”