
Headcrusher

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WARNING: THIS EXTRACT CONTAINS EXPLICIT LANGUAGE!

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A New Year's Greeting to the Management of REX Bank

Right then, you lot, everyone down.

Press-ups.

1-2, 1-2, 1-2.

What's with the panting, Citron? Too paunchy, you old git? Never mind, a hundred sit-ups in the snow should help shed the pounds. We don't mess about round here.

Now, WALKING ON YOUR HANDS.

Oh dear, looks like Pylny's snuffed it. Finally the old fart's croaked for real. What a bummer. Never got to work him over properly. Quit on us, the lousy slob. Got off easy. Oh, he's breathing is he? Fantastic! Put his balls in that vice. Let's bring him round a bit. What's he yelling for? Well yeah, I know it hurts! Stick something in his gob. That's better. We've had enough fucking whinging from him.

What is it Four-Eyes? Broke your specs, did they? You poor bastard! Now, you chip off the old bourgeois block, used to sleeping, screwing and stuffing your belly . . . You won't be screwing any more! You won't have anything left to screw with! But why would you want to anyway, when you've only got three . . . no, make that two and a half minutes left to live? And that's assuming I'm feeling KIND! Because otherwise it'll take you TWO WEEKS to die. Yeah, and why not? That's a fucking great idea. Right, chuck him in the basement . . .

Tired, you wankers? Lost any weight yet, Citron?

Don't you go anywhere because this party's just fucking getting started!

Right, give him a PASTING. Waste him!

Look at that, still alive. Breathing.

Right then, stand him upright. Well yeah, I know you can't pissing well tell which end's his legs and which end's his head, because the fat bastard is absolutely spherical. Let's find his head.

Waste him! That's it! The bit he's yelling with – that's his head.

FINISH him! Excellent, excellent! That's him done.

HAPPY HOLIDAY, DEAR BOSSES! HAPPY NEW YEAR!

And, by the way, where's the champagne?

For about five seconds I gazed at the result of an hour's professional effort with the same feeling of satisfaction that follows a fleeting and uncomplicated casual sexual encounter. Then I quickly exited from the file and automatically glanced over my shoulder.

In the course of a year, this conditional reflex had become firmly established.

Nimble manoeuvring the cursor, I tore through the tangled hierarchies and their miscellaneous suffixes of dats, bmps, syses, exes, prvs, tmpls, logs and pifs. Prodding ENTER, I emerged from the gullies of the WORDART administrative directory, moved the cursor left and up, clicked and surfaced from the directory TEMPT. Another upwards twitch, and I slipped out of HKGRAPH. Tumbled out of SYSTEM. Slid out of COPYCAT. Dodged out of WORDOUT. And finally broke out of LAYOUTT into the top level of the 2GHz Pentium PC's hard drive.

A ten-metre-square press room, divided into a dozen transparent, functional cells by a simple labyrinth of glass and plastic. Background noise. The patient murmuring of inkjet printers. The gentle, efficient farting of processors. The obsessive gasping of photocopiers. The perplexed sobbing of faxes. The insistent jangling of phones. The rapid rattling of keyboards. Work in progress. Employees on the job. Business purposefully assuming visible form in words, arithmetical ideographs and sometimes – very rarely – hieroglyphs. Swarms of operational data scurrying through the local network. Official letters being assembled out of prefabricated blocks. The powerful mechanical organism of a big bank functioning efficiently.

Payments being made. Interest accruing. Money talking. Business meeting money.

Throughout the whole of the civilised world, this particular way of organising office space is regarded as the most progressive and efficient. On the one hand, your vulnerable, fragile privacy is considerably respected, in total compliance with the universal code of political correctness. Look, you have your own private, inviolable compartment. 1.5 square metres of personal space. But on the other hand, you always remain in full and open view of everybody else. The ideal of totalitarian democracy, rendered flesh by the genius of bureaucratic design: each and every employee subject to a constant cross-monitoring that is not autocratic and malign, but universal, reciprocal and mutually advantageous. Having as its goal to prevent

you (imperfect and prone to malfunction as you are) from slipping out of synch with the perfectly-tuned metabolism of REX International Commercial Bank.

‘Vadim, where’s the budget document for quarterly advertising?’ asked the bright young PR talent Olezhek, leaning round from the next cell and agitatedly twitching the thin little moustache above his whimsical upper lip.

A glance at the moustache, the lip, the cream-coloured waistcoat and the sunset tones of the highly tasteful silk tie, convinced me yet again that the rumours concerning the young talent’s inclinations were absolutely true.

‘Vadim!’ A faint note of hysteria had appeared in his voice, ‘I want the document! I’ve got an efficiency of 59.6 here, and I distinctly remember it was 63.2!’

‘Try looking under x,’ I told him, after a pause. Then I turned away towards Murzilla.

This massive work of art was a bronze Tyrannosaurus Rex with an aggressively spiked crown, designed in a style of palaeontological realism by the sculptor Gochei Huskizadze, and the only entity in the office that I could look at without a feeling of loathing. Perhaps even with a certain degree of goodwill. He was all teeth and malice. More than once, groping around in the back pocket of my subconscious, I’d come across the thought that some day Murzilla’s six kilogrammes of bronze would cease their passive personification of power and prosperity, come to life and devour every last one of the bank’s damned employees. Me too, probably.

The door to the press room whispered a gentle warning as it opened to reveal in its aperture the nonchalant figure, evenly tinted by authentic tropical tan, elegantly attired by Hugo Boss, ergonomically harmonised by thrice-weekly workouts in the expensive gym of the World Class Sports Club: my boss, the head of the bank’s press service, Andrei Vladlenovich Voronin.

Four-Eyes.

He scanned the premises with lazy irony through the smoked glass of his futuristically designed and stratospherically priced Yamamoto spectacles. Paused. Looked through his sites. Took aim. At me. Launched himself elegantly across the labyrinth.

I turned back to my keyboard, jerked the cursor across the screen, prodded enter and landed splat in the putrid little swamp of congrats.doc. Focusing intently, I ran my fingers over a couple of keys and my eyes over the few lines.

On the cold, frightening threshold of the new millennium one feels more keenly than ever the need for the warm, strong, dependable shoulder of a Family. You and I, dear colleagues, have been exceptionally fortunate. Because REX is a Family, and every Family, especially if it’s written with a capital letter, has its own . . .

Four-Eyes was already standing behind my shoulder. I didn't turn round straight away. Instead I shook my head gravely, massaging the bridge of my nose in a gesture of noble fatigue, slumped against the oval back support of my chair . . . and only at that moment appeared to notice the boss.

'Andrei Vladlenovich!' I half-rose from my seat with the pious respect of the honest toiler. 'I was just . . .'

Four-Eyes stared into the monitor with a derisive smirk that showed off the tips of his ultra-white incisors.

'And every Family,' he declaimed with feeling, precisely highlighting the capital letter with the climax of his intonation, 'has its own freak.'

He sniggered. Slapped the honest toiler patronisingly on the shoulder. He was two years younger than me.

'Attaboy, Vadik! Go for it. When Citron reads that, he'll just lap it up. A fucking Family . . .' he sniggered again, this time in a different tone. For Four-Eyes, this really was his family.

He swung round, grazing me invisibly with the ethereal wing of his environmentally friendly Kenzo perfume, and disappeared into his own office. A separate office. But - separated from the rest of the press room by the same kind of glass and plastic wall . . . But - a wall fretted by the fine horizontal ribbing of blinds . . . Democracy maintained. But seniority too.

Feeling almost flattered, I returned my gaze to the screen and my hands to the keyboard in brisk inspiration; shuffled my fingers in the vigorous gesture of a surgeon or a pianist. Stimulated by its standard one-shot hit of dutiful enthusiasm, my brain strained to formulate the missing ending of the unfinished phrase. Has . . . its own . . . But the praiseworthy impulse never reached my fingers. Before it could produce the intended result, the effect of the shot of undiluted conformity flipped over into loathsome, tacky withdrawal. The way they say a fix of heroin only lasts veteran junkies a couple of seconds. I gazed with increasing apathy at the three and a half sentences of the New Year's greeting to our great chiefs and beloved leaders - commissioned by Four-Eyes from me as a former notable shark of the pen - understanding the meaning of what was written there less and less. The forefinger of the hand that had wilted on to the keyboard drove the cursor backwards and forwards along the four lines of text. Then I roused myself and, with renewed resolve, pressed alt x.

Picking up speed, I tore into LAYOUTT, squirmed into WORDOUT, slid into COPYCAT, tumbled into SYSTEM, and crashed into HKGRAPH. I moved the cursor right and down, prodded ENTER, and dived into the thickets of the WORDART administrative directory.

Wrinkling up my forehead, I created the file prayer.txt.

Oh God! They've really fucking got to me!

All these shitty fellow-employees, all these jumped-up bosses. If I had my way, they'd be taking turns reading their own positive test results for cancer of everything! All these WANKERS, QUEERS, COCKSUCKERS! They've really fucking got to me. Lord, please take them away. Take them Yourself or let Your colleagues have them – I don't give a toss. And if You don't take them Yourself, then I'll take care of it. Just one more day of this life, two at the most and that's it. What won't I do to them. Charlie Manson will die of envy.

Do You get the drift, oh Lord?

They say that hope dies last. That's bollocks. Let me tell you, there was a time when people entertained great hopes of me. Those hopes died a long time ago, and it wasn't exactly painless. But I'm still alive and kicking.

Twelve years ago I graduated from the first arts lycée in the country (or union republic as it was then), an incubator for youthful talent that was hastily contrived in the reanimated fashion of the 1960s. The teachers there were capable of spotting a future Pushkin in a trilobite. And they certainly had no trouble spotting one in me. The ability to erect easily and rapidly, on any pretext and starting from nothing, a highly intellectual and entirely specious structure of false assumptions, strained interpretations, standard clichés presented from a non-standard angle, complete with amazingly apt quotations from Borges, Brodsky, Beckett and Baudrillard, all concocted on the spot as I went along – this atoned for absolutely everything else: the loutishness, the bugger-it attitude, the refusal as a matter of principle to do homework assignments and the regular failure to turn up for two thirds of classes.

This ability continued to be highly thought of for a further four years in the local faculty of journalism. And even for the first two years of the next six, which I spent as a columnist – the in-house, gold-plated pen-pusher of the Riga daily newspaper SM (the sado-masochistic abbreviation was the compressed remnant of the obsolete Russian word combination 'Sovietskaya molodyozh' – 'Soviet Youth'). For a certain period of time I even felt that I was privileged – that must be the way people who work in all sorts of minor elite subgroups position themselves in the context of life.

I didn't have to comb the city in search of fugitive, well camouflaged pretexts for reporting. I didn't have to humiliate myself fishing for dreary interviews. I didn't have to rework kilogrammes of texts from the Intermedia information agency: Di Caprio screws the whole island! Lada Dens has never tasted sperm! Lesbian rocker artificially inseminated from pop idol junky! I was transferred around and used with apprehensive respect, like an expensive and delicate piece of apparatus – quite literally expensive, since I was rather well paid for my ability to analyse, formulate and articulate quickly, comprehensibly and not entirely trivially. For being able, essentially, to express my own Private Opinion intelligibly.

At first I accepted my new role with the old, familiar feeling of being an inadvertent impostor that went back to my lycée days. A feeling of unpremeditated, but not exactly unconscious, chicanery. I knew that vigorous exegesis simply oozed out of

me as easily as Colgate Total out of a new tube. All I had to do was chop the said substance up into bite-size chunks, lay it out in columns with the standard ten-pointtype, top it off with trenchant, aphoristic headlines and dump it on the baking-tray of the page. Fashionable politics and trendy economics, chic culture and cult social chic were spliced together in this progressive salami like the red and white stripes in the aforesaid Colgate. There was one lesson I had mastered thoroughly when I was still in school: just as there are no more than nine degrees of kinship separating any two people, it is possible to connect absolutely anything you want with anything else you like, and the absence of any real knowledge of any of the areas that are linked together is no hindrance at all, in fact it's a positive bonus. My pen's agility was born of irresponsibility. But I very rapidly stopped feeling embarrassed about that and even began enjoying myself. My chicanery was not exposed. On the contrary, it brought me direct and tangible dividends, and I soon began to regard them as well deserved. I realised that I was clever.

And that was when everything began to change.

Imperceptibly but implacably the newspaper's premises contracted and the wages shrank. The Head Men were following each other with the speed of machine-gun bullets, due to the same economic processes which, in more lucrative and less cultured walks of life, had assumed the crude form of the contract and the hit. The latest Head Man dropped into my columnist's corner office for a drop of the strong stuff less and less often. Then the consumption of strong stuff in the work place was strictly forbidden. Then the ephemeral Head Men were replaced by the Head of the Head Men, the personal representative of the owners of the controlling block of shares.

The Head Head had the voice of a church choir master, the appearance of a middle-level Sicilian Camorra boss, the dimensions of a compact, well-nourished Montgolfier balloon and a habit of smoking phallic cigars with the romantic name of 'Romeo and Juliet'. Nowadays, if the echoes of rumours are to be believed, the Head of Heads is working as a popular toastmaster in the town of Saratov. But, back then, the invasion of the newspaper's minor star system by such a massive and forbidding heavenly body was enough to disrupt it completely. Yes indeed, you know nothing at all about life, said the heavenly body, flashing the gold car-tyre on its index finger at me. Now I'm going to do the talking and you're going to listen. And do what you're told. Point one: do you think we do creative writing here? Like fuck. We 'service people', get it?

The Head Head probably didn't know that, in the language that won the Cold War, the expression 'service people' had a slightly different significance. Or maybe he did. The more time that passes, the more I incline to the second opinion.

From the moment the transition to the oral-genital paradigm was officially adopted, the process of my own financial degradation began to accelerate, first at a constant rate, and then exponentially. At first, out of sheer fatalistic stubbornness, I tried not to notice it. Until they stopped noticing me.

Until I completely disappeared from sight.

From Soviet journalism's massive communal apartment in the twenty-storey House of the Press, the editorial offices of the Latvian periodicals were scattered across the city by the centrifugal force of rapidly rising rents. SM was flung a distance of four kilometres, across the river to a separate new building in the city's business supercentre. One move is as good for business as two fires or three floods, and the conveyor-belt of the newspaper's life was halted for a full nine days, at the end of which I showed up at my new place of work, the door marked with the sacred Buddhist number 512. At first the massive brand-new door wouldn't budge. Then it did.

Behind the door were several young men I didn't know in sports jackets and gold-rimmed spectacles circulating very rapidly and purposefully along complex intersecting routes that were clearly not random. They were talking on mobile phones, eating gigantic 'submarine' sandwiches, battering the keys of laptops, dictating to the secretary, sending and receiving faxes, gulping coffee – all at the same time, as far as I could tell. I gazed at them for about five seconds, mentally assembling the primitive phrase, 'Sorry, I think I got the wrong door'. But one of the young men beat me to it. Making a minor correction to his precisely calculated route, he deviated in the direction of the door and, with an economical gesture, closed it right in my face. Without even looking at me.

'Sorry, I think I got the wrong door,' I apologised gallantly to the dark-brown reinforced panel of planed timber. Stood there for a while. Then set off to clarify the situation.

The Head Head, Lev Lvovich, was sitting in the middle of his new office (two and a half times the floor space and volume of his last one) in a synthetic leather armchair of the brand designed to adapt itself to the body of any occupant. I could see that, despite its vigorously promoted elastic conformability to all shapes and sizes, the armchair was having a hard time adapting to the shape and size of the shareholders' personal representative. I registered a brief twinge of pity for the article of furniture. The Head Head was thoughtfully studying something small that glinted glassily. Moving closer, I saw a flask full of yellowish saline solution. Floating in it was half a scrotum, neatly dissected with perfect precision by something very sharp. I shuddered and took a closer look. It turned out to be a naturalistic plastic imitation. And on the flask I spotted a plain laboratory-style label with the laconic inscription 'Faberge's Ball'.

The Head Head raised his head to look at me. In blank incomprehension. I waited for his 'us and them' recognition system to throw up a positive result, but his expression didn't change.

'Lev Lvovich,' I mumbled, 'down there . . . the office, somehow . . .'

The Head Head blinked and carefully set the scrotum down on the edge of his incompletely assembled, highpedigree office desk.

'What's your problem?' he enquired aggressively.

'Well, it's the office,' I said simply. 'Where is mine now?'

'What do you need an office for?' asked the Head Head.

'To work,' I said, amazed.

'Work,' he repeated thoughtfully, almost dreamily. Then, with the sudden, unexpected agility of a sumo wrestler he stood up and walked over to the wide, bright window. 'So what can you do?' He half-turned away from the window and aimed the digit with the ring at me.

'I'm a columnist,' I said, totally nonplussed. 'Well . . . A commentator. An analyst.'

'What's that then? The cleverest dick on the block?'

I couldn't think of anything to say to that.

Personal representative Lev Lvovich waited. But in vain. Then he nodded to himself in satisfaction and summoned me to him with an infinitesimal twitch of the same ring-bearing finger. I automatically moved closer.

'Take a look, clever dick,' the Head Head said amicably, jabbing his versatile finger at a virginal window with the transparent protective hymen still intact on its frame.

What I saw going on below triggered a momentary attack of déjà vu. It was the same thing I'd seen just a minute earlier in office 512. That same intense, rapid displacement (totally incomprehensible to the outside observer but clearly meaningful from the inside) of manpower units dolled up in expensive sports-jacket uniforms and shiny imported automotive technology.

'THEY,' Lev Lvovich growled didactically, grasping me by the lapel with impetuous tenacity, 'ARE WORKING. Earning money. Paying money. Some of it to us. But for them to pay you as well, you have to prove that they need to. They couldn't give a shit that you're such a clever dick. They don't know you. And they don't have to. So you . . .' - he turned me through a hundred and eighty degrees and released his grip - 'go. Go on, go on. Go to them. And think what you've got to offer them. If you think of anything, then you can come back.'

I went. And I thought. And I didn't go back.