

REQUIEM
FOR A SOLDIER

Oleg Pavlov

Translated by
Anna Gunin



LOS ANGELES · HIGH WYCOMBE

GENESIS

They were still selling watermelons in the wind and the cold, while Karaganda sailed on the steppe winds deeper and deeper into the approaching winter. Every morning the clouds would timidly disperse, having come out of hiding during the night to hang among the crushed crumbs of scattered stars. November's widescreen monochrome sky was laid bare. Out of the stone slab of day came forth the cold, which sulkily prowled the streets, the avenues, the squares – spaces where the surging winds swayed the raft-like columns of russet trees. The prison guard regiment switched over to winter time as it had always done: on the scheduled day when the order was given. Decked out in greatcoats, the camp's guards and sentries were adapting to their warmer underclothes. The only ones stubbornly looking forward to the start of each new day were the men confined for treatment in the regimental infirmary.

There was seldom a peep louder than a mouse from the occupants of the infirmary. Those souls kept quiet, dosed up on their medicines. The mice, though, made quite a din: those voracious little grey wretches were everywhere. As the weather cooled, they had migrated from the garden, where the harvest had already been gathered, to the cellar and wall

cavities in the shack-like infirmary – a building that proved fateful even for them. The mice entertained the prisoners in the infirmary, sometimes even comforting them, striking up hearty friendships when it took their fancy and with anyone they pleased if beckoned with a mere crust of bread. This was where they came into the world, beneath the floorboards and between the walls, but they were rarely seen as corpses, save by the one man who hunted them down with a passion, day in, day out: the head of the infirmary, who had a funny-sounding surname and hated with a vengeance all forms of life that gave out even the tiniest autonomous squeak.

The infirmary mice chomped their way through so many different drugs that you'd think they were suffering from every ailment at once and even laying in stores prophylactically. In the space of a year they had already devoured several sacks of Novalgin alone. The tablets had first emboldened the mice to the point of stupor, then made them as clever as geniuses, but they hadn't been killed – well, all medicines are tested on mice, after all, before getting the green light for industrial production. And the man who went by the name of Institutov knew it all too well. Those mice were the only ones who could stand up to the military medic, and they roamed freely.

The head of the infirmary was no servile old trooper, neither in temperament nor in spirit. At some point he had been enlisted to work as a dental technician, having been to vocational college, which distinguished him considerably from everybody else, and at moments when he felt the need to remind people who they were dealing with, he would declare imposingly: 'Well, being a man with a college education, I . . . '

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As with all the civilian staff, in the interests of uniformity and equality they bestowed upon him the rank of junior officer. But Institutov did not have to go chasing ignominiously after promotion. When the previous head had drunk himself irrevocably into oblivion, they appointed the teetotal toothpuller in his place: a man of medium height with a neatly clipped moustache, a dull complexion and arms that were short and unremarkable but had amassed muscle with the help of an almost daily regimen of weight training. Institutov fastidiously and at times even fearfully abhorred anything plain and simple, so his workout with kettle bells, for example, he called his 'kettle-bell sport', and whenever he gave an ordinary jab, it became an 'outpatient procedure'. Although the toothpuller cut rather a hefty figure, he tried to accentuate his elegance and beauty – yet the only feature to exude allure or power was his innately dark, teetotal eyes that glinted like anthracite. Sometimes they would narrow suddenly with malice and resentment like two little devils, while at other times a pair of sleek, rotund, magnificent demons would surface imperially from their depths, meaning the head of the infirmary was feeling content.

Institutov made a habit of judging people: whenever he felt irked, he would liken their personalities to characters from literary works, and not even necessarily to bad characters. No person held the slightest novelty for him. He would remark, with a note of exasperation, 'You're hardly the first of your ilk.' That's not to say he had read widely or seen much of life. But he had an inkling of things, having picked up a smattering of this and that, and at the sight of living people he would grimace like an erudite man faced with some phoniness.

The head of the infirmary abhorred alcohol; it seemed as though sober living was one of his most firmly held principles, perhaps even an ethical ideal. The reality was he suffered from a stomach ulcer, but he kept hush, ashamed that his body could host so common and primitive an ailment. Alcohol was always to hand in the infirmary, so it was odd to see spirits freely available and the head of the infirmary strutting about like some scrupulous insect, while across the street was a hostel for prison staff without a drop of drink in sight where everyone would always be horribly drunk and you'd hear a wail of singing, raucous hollering, children bawling, and a fanfare of dishes clattering and smashing.

For Institutov, service in the infirmary was all one long jittery race. He never found the time to treat people. Almost the entire day was taken up with important and shadowy matters that may have borne a semblance to disease, but only because they smacked of fatal outcomes. He was oblivious to the idea that in such cases people could be driven by diligence, or profit, or fear – his only desire was to be rid of the troubling business just as soon as he could. On each occasion it was merely due to his squeamishness that he carried out his work in the finest possible manner, contriving throughout to sparkle with squeaky cleanliness and thus validate one of the epithets applied to his profession: 'men in white coats'. Institutov had the odious feeling that they were using him for their own ends as a clean-up person in cases where they were afraid of getting their own hands dirty, but all he could do was revolt inwardly in silence or suffer senselessly, despising those above him. Indeed, it seemed typical of him to carry something out despite the torment, and be in torment while he carried it out.

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He had for a long time been too idle to treat people's teeth, or perhaps he just couldn't abide unclean and malodorous mouths, preferring instead to whip the teeth out – especially for the lower ranks. In his daily work as a dentist, one moment inflicting pain, the next eliminating it, he personally felt little – he just got on with the job. And he would tell his patients, 'Well, what can we do? My friend, be brave – I'm the dentist, not the pain.' His patients would approach him in dread of perhaps the most daunting pain known to man. They would tremble before him, throw themselves at his feet – though it was simply the toothache filling them with fear. The toothpuller from time to time would sense the delicious power he held over people, but unable to find anything else to lust after, he kept on passionately obliterating those mice.

It was not from existential boredom that Institutov succumbed to the temptation to strew poison and set up a blunt little mouse guillotine – and when he stamped some of the wretches out, he felt no heartache. In the whole wide world he loved only himself, and then not even with that blind familial love directed towards one's own blood, but lustfully, lasciviously, the way one person's flesh hungers incessantly for the flesh of someone still lovelier. But his entire paradise on earth was being wrecked on a daily basis by the mice, who could only be moved to act through fright. He was especially aghast and aggrieved whenever he found right there in his pockets fresh mouse droppings, which were not only white in colour but tablet-shaped. Those ever-present grey creatures were alone to blame for everything. Sometimes Institutov would mumble, 'They're trying to kill me,' and he'd scowl with a haunted air, utterly miserable

and pitiful. At other times he would denounce them out loud: ‘They don’t want to pull their weight in society!’ And the fact he was powerless to tackle those pilfering rascals, who were forever stealing brazenly from the infirmary, was well and truly driving him insane. Those grey little brutes were the cause of his anguish, much like the anguish experienced by people with toothache who fancy their entire life is convulsing piteously, racked by a great tapeworm of pain. Institutov could understand the mice when they squeaked. He knew almost all of them by sight and was quite sure that the mouse scurrying under the cabinet in his office was the very same one he’d seen last week in the treatment room or some such place. He remembered precisely which mouse had been stealing, all the outrages it had got up to and the overall harm it posed. He saw mice as a breeding ground for every contagious disease, from cholera to the plague, claiming for some reason that mice lived and fed only on refuse, despite the fact that they lived and ate alongside him, sometimes even right next to him in his office, feeding from his own forgotten biscuit left lying on the table. Yet the chief crime of these wretches apparently lay in the fact that, as Institutov would have it, they were plotting to kill him. From time to time he had feverish visions of them scaling his body, gnawing through his throat or veins and then crawling right into his mouth. Hence the head of the infirmary was, in some deeper sense, not so much possessed of a murderous passion to eradicate their entire genus as tirelessly battling to save his own life.

Yet the various chemical poisons that tasted of saltpetre seldom worked on them; it was as if the rodents had long ago discovered an antidote among the drugs they fed on in

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the infirmary. At his own expense, Institutov had purchased a large batch of mousetraps, and ever since he'd been filling them up with delicious-smelling bait bought with his own hard-earned cash. Every other mouse, benefitting from experience, patiently ate around the traps, dining as Institutov's guest, and then made haste each month to bring fresh additions into the world. So it was impossible to wipe them out unless you could destroy them all at once – say, by setting fire to the infirmary. Towards nightfall, as the head of the infirmary left the scene of his battle for survival, the mice would emerge, parading in columns. The lights were not yet out, but everyone was already tucked up in bed ready for sleep. Then they would sweep forth in ranks across the vast flat expanse of linoleum, like little soldiers in overcoats in their grey pelts. Chances were only the most battle-hardened took part in these parades – their motions were resolute and harmonised. After gliding round in a circle, the mouse militia would vanish, to general laughter. Then the lights went out and everyone fell asleep in blissful silence, while the mice did battle somewhere else, valiantly surviving to see another morning.

The toms and she-cats that Institutov from time to time brought in to the infirmary for mouse-catching did not stay put for long; given a day or two, they would ingloriously scarper, shinning up the apple trees in the garden and then dropping out of them like wailing comets onto their tarmac home turf. The first of the felines to flee had acquired the name of Barsik, and ever since, this name somehow attached itself to all the other cats. People would stroke a Barsik; they would give it some milk. But the animals nonetheless wanted their freedom. The head of the infirmary, it should be

mentioned, detested pretty much all animals, as if in his eyes they were somehow all descended from those abominable mice. He would quite gladly have strangled and hanged the cats, who also fed on the scraps and were forever brazenly pilfering things from people, if it weren't for his need of them – and so he caught them in the refuse and smuggled them into the infirmary in the bottom of his briefcase, all wrapped up fastidiously in plastic bags. After their suffocating ordeal in the briefcase, no force on earth could keep the Barsiks within the walls of the infirmary, where all but one of the wards usually stood empty.

Come what may, the head of the infirmary had to cling on to his patients. Anyone who recovered would be fed until his cheeks grew as plump and flush as a bashful maiden's, and they were condemned to interminable treatment. Someone needed to scrub the place to that squeaky cleanliness which Institutov so admired; someone had to listen to his sermons and to toil away for their own good – and it wouldn't be the ward attendants, who'd become insolent from idleness and who filled him with fear. So it was the dexterous and docile lads who were on his books for months as contagious patients and whose illnesses had gradually mutated into chronic disease. In their own units they had been guarding convicts, some as guards, others as sentries, but from the moment they found themselves in the infirmary they were confined indoors for upwards of a month. They had been born in a variety of places and circumstances, but all in the same period. So they had more or less all turned eighteen when the call-up came. At first, in the mass of their own kind, all camouflaged in grassy, earthy colours, they would run, then crawl, then march imposingly in the same direction, but their sense of self faded

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as they all merged into one, and they were blithely unaware of what lay ahead. It wasn't a unit or a herd or a throng – no, it was the people itself, with its own mission, yet also with a personality of its own. Childishly trusting – and already more or less cowed. Incredibly resilient – and yet moaning and groaning at the slightest complaint. Hale and hearty – and yet bone idle. It was as if they had all entered this world in their parents' footsteps only to cross into manhood and manage before dying to leave in their wake some similarly trusting, resilient, moaning, hearty, idle child. Many of those whom fate had escorted to the infirmary would sneeringly tell the same dull old story about their close shave with death. The only ones to keep quiet were those hiding in the corner hoping to end it all. And among them all there'd be some true hero who'd been burnt in the arms depot and fought back the flames to prevent an explosion after he'd torched the place himself while trying to make an electric kettle element out of a high-voltage knife switch.

Life in an infirmary bed may have been a good deal more nourishing than in the army barracks, to say nothing of the prison camp, but the mere words 'sick list' and 'infirmary contingent' were enough to send the brains of yesterday's guards and sentries into a crazy whirl until they burned with a longing for freedom. All the quirks of life here suddenly turned into a reflection of the stinking prison and the lousy camp, with their regimes, inmates and miserable black void. The sensation of walking in front of yourself down the straight, narrow corridor as if being led under guard took some getting used to. The smug, imperious glances of those who'd breezed in from the outside bruisingly knocked the composure from your shoulders.

The dressing gown issued in the infirmary somehow had a demeaning effect.

The officers' ward, which had always been filled with nothing but mice and a desolate emptiness, one day became charged with a particularly oppressive silence. With the arrival of a young lieutenant at the infirmary, it had become gloomy for no clear rhyme or reason. On the day of his admission, the new patient was escorted by two officers who didn't look like medical staff and, what's more, with their faces clad in bronze tans they were clearly not locals. The entire party was still free of overcoats. They must have been serving on the edge of the steppes, where come spring or autumn the sun blazed like in the desert, and where boredom and the blues could drive men out of their minds. From that faraway place this lieutenant had been brought to Karaganda under the escort of officers – and all just to put him in an ordinary infirmary. His escorts stood like heathen idols waiting to receive the officer's dusty, faded uniform, which had slipped off stocking-like as though it were a cast skin. With the uniform in their arms, they briskly vanished, carrying out the wishes of some unseen person. The lieutenant whose clothing had been taken – stripping him perhaps of his uniform, perhaps of his freedom – was issued a gown from the infirmary's stores, one so roomy yet so tattered that the officer looked like a mendicant even in the lonely, fully enclosed garden, where they spotted him coming out for a smoke. They also saw him each morning in the utility room, where he washed and took his time carefully shaving.

Institutov ran the infirmary as though it were his home, and you couldn't take a step without his house-proud chidings and proddings. There can't have been a woman alive who

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could have stomached that rancorous old-maidish behaviour, which was why Institutov, no matter how he bent over backwards to please the ladies, was still knocking about as a barren old bachelor. With the punctiliousness of a eunuch, the head of the infirmary not only tried to knock everyone and everything into shape, but would also offer a running commentary of tedious speeches. Whatever living beings or even inanimate objects turned up in the infirmary, Institutov would immediately form his own opinion of them, and they were all expected to indulge his needs, not only by following his rules but also by listening to his lectures. When the lieutenant made his appearance, though, Institutov kept a wary silence and carefully avoided contact with this new person, as if the strange young man had been placed in the infirmary for purposes other than treatment. No doubt the real reason for keeping him in the infirmary was indeed known to him, and that was why he avoided the officers' ward, merely muttering once or twice as he glanced in its direction, 'Fancies himself a Raskolnikov, eh . . . '

When Institutov decided to put the new arrival into some kind of quarantine, his eyes happened to alight on one of his soldier charges, who was already hard at work painting, towering above him near the ceiling all alone on the trestle.

The head of the infirmary became engrossed for a moment in an icy tingle of conscience that was pricking him, but with a somewhat asinine pomposity he called out, 'Kholmogorov! Come, my friend, get down from the heavens . . . ' The soldier dropped what he was doing and clumsily descended from the trestle's height – half-naked and splodged from head to toe in whitewash, he looked like some gypsum figure adorning

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a park. Glancing at the foolish statue with his drooping arms, Institutov frowned and said, 'Well, my friend, I have a new job for you: to serve breakfast, lunch and supper in the officers' ward and, when our new patient has finished, you can take away the dirty dishes.'