MANTAS ADOMĖNAS

The Coin and the Labyrinth, Part I

Excerpt translated by *Jeremy Hill*

2. The First Chapter

Nizhnedvinsk, Northern Russia, 2018

He woke up not from the hum, crash and thunder of the construction crane outside the window, nor from the groans and curses of the hungover neighbour from behind the thin wall. For a few seconds, he couldn't work out what had woken him, or where he was, or how he'd got there, or even who he was. The walls painted chest-high with light green paint, the plastered ceiling stained with traces of damp, the rusty radiator pipe protruding from the wall, and the creaking of the metal bed, brought back memories of his childhood travels – nights spent in inhospitable hotels in provincial towns, long walks from the station through unfamiliar streets, shadowy menacing stares of passers-by, endless, often incomprehensible negotiations between parents and cashiers, hotel administrators and train managers, for a ticket, a room, or a seat on a train. No one was willing to concede anything. At every turn you faced obstacles that seemed insurmountable – every step opened up a new Zenonian paradox. It was always a surprise when, after lengthy wrangling and dispute, after jostling in the queue, you finally managed to achieve something: to buy the train ticket or book the hotel room. He had completely forgotten that world. Now he was struck by the full force of it – he felt as if he was trying vainly to run away in a nightmarish dream, or was engulfed in a fantasy from a Kafka novel.

But there was something more lingering in the air than the nightmare of childhood memories – there was a barely discernible anxiety, a feeling hovering at the margins of perception, that something was not as it should be. He sat up, put his feet down on the rough, not very clean linoleum floor and, when the bed creaked, he realised what had woken him up: the silence reigning in the corridor. His room was at one end of it, close to the landing, where a couple of intermittent lifts opened out. He remembered the sounds of the previous night: footsteps, raised voices of drunken people, an unexpectedly loud woman's laugh, and steps again – the heavy, masculine, slightly uneven footsteps of a person not quite sober, then the clatter of high heels, back and forth, – to the right, towards the stairs, and to the left, into the long gloomy tunnel of the corridor, marked at equal intervals by greyish-blue doors. Before he fell asleep, he was thinking how intense and lively the night life seemed in this hotel – when he checked in, everything appeared dead. But now the footsteps had stopped. Even the whirl of doors slamming from the neighbouring room had died away. If it wasn't for the humming of the crane, you might have called it a ringing silence. And he realised exactly what that meant: they had recognised him, they had tracked him down. That, of course, was to be expected.

Anyone who ventures into the depths of Russia cannot expect to stay unnoticed for long. No matter how hard you try to adapt and fit in, sooner or later foreigners give themselves away by their dress or their speech, and ultimately by their manners, by smiling at a passer-by or by thanking someone over-politely in a shop. He remembered how, many years earlier in St. Petersburg, he tried to buy tickets for the Hermitage – for himself and his hosts' daughter, a thick-haired beautiful Jewish girl called Lena, who was taking him around the city. Having mentally rehearsed his lines in order to hide his Baltic accent – he couldn't afford the rate for foreigners – he uttered what he thought were impeccable phrases. The cashier gave him a languid look and lethargically handed him the tickets, – but they were barely round the corner when he got a scolding from Lena: 'They can see straightaway you're not a local! We never say 'please'. Don't forget!' All the more so in a deserted, dying provincial town, where everyone watches and knows everything. It was only a matter of time before he'd be noticed and reported to the authorities. Besides, he didn't even try to hide too much, just enough to avoid being caught by a bullying policeman or a skinhead. He wasn't one of those trained to have a perfect cover, to be re-embodied as a local, to assume another person's carefully constructed identity. He was not a real secret agent.

Having pened the bathroom door, so he could hear if anyone tried to lock the door from outside, he unhurriedly showered under an anaemic jet of water in the yellowed bath.

He shaved quickly and, in the grey plastic-framed mirror above the sink, as he did every morning, he critically assessed the image that appeared before his eyes: the flabby but still regular shape of the face, replicating the oval outline of the mirror, the muddy sand-coloured hair, thick, not yet grey, roughly cut, separated by a slightly untidy parting – it took a lot of effort and money to make it look so cheap – the resolute, cold, large eyes, the strong chin. His features looked fairly Slavic, but a trained eye could see the difference at once, and it wouldn't be easy to confuse or dissimulate: the nose was straighter, the cheekbones not so prominent, the whole impression of the face was softer, the slant of the blue eyes slightly different. The name which had grown up with these facial features was also not Russian: Tomas.

He wore tattered clothes, shabby, with vestigial damp: grey suit trousers, which the fateful goddesses of worn clothes had at some point separated from their jacket, a half-tailored striped shirt, a black leather jacket which had also seen better days, and thick-soled, shapeless shoes. The outfit had been carefully put together back in Vilnius. Now that bags of second-hand clothes from affluent countries were distributed throughout the world, inculcating the same worn-out fashions and dress standards everywhere, finding a suit for a secret mission to Russia had become much easier. 'Another form of globalisation', he thought. At least we don't have to scratch around for Russian-made clothes, or sew hard-to-come-by labels on the items, in the hope that no one will spot a fake – a headache in the Cold war era. Compared to clothing and household goods, it was easy to obtain a valid Russian Federation passport with the right photo – even when he wasn't in the Office's employ. Now, all you had to do was fill in an application ten working days in advance.

He quietly got dressed, then quickly opened the door onto the corridor and looked around. There was the sound of a door slamming somewhere, and footsteps clumping

off. Two young men were smoking on the elevator landing, almost pointedly ignoring him. That was to be expected. Another one would be waiting downstairs in the hotel lobby, probably reading a newspaper, and another one – a woman, perhaps? – outside. Somewhere nearby, on opposite sides of the street, two teams would be loitering in their cars – in case he took a taxi, which was unlikely in such a town. He locked the door – a meaningless gesture, they would still search his things as soon as he left, and find nothing, no elusive incriminating detail. Except, of course, his very presence here in this town incriminated him. But there would be nothing that might reveal the purpose of his trip – no notes, no letters, no photos, no media. It's impossible to betray what you don't know yourself. And Tomas didn't know the point of his journey.

* * *

He had arrived in Nizhnedvinsk from St. Petersburg when it was already evening, as dusk was falling, on a suburban train, changing twice on the way. He made sure no one was following. He went straight to the hotel; the lobby smelt of stale cigarette smoke – from whole generations of *Kosmos* and *Kazbek*, *Pamir* and *Prima*. At the reception desk, he took the key from a nonchalant hotel manager, who immediately returned to the small TV set on the corner of the desk, broadcasting some local talk show on half-volume. He put his meagre belongings away and went outside. Turning to the right, he found a phone booth two blocks away, the location of which he'd noted in advance. He dialled a Moscow number, uttered a terse phrase and, hanging up the receiver, walked briskly back to the hotel via a roundabout route. He didn't feel like walking in this city for long after dark. Although he wasn't afraid of a gang of drunken teenagers or knife-wielding thugs – a common threat in such Russian provincial towns – he didn't want to draw unnecessary attention to himself.

As he made his way back along the dark streets and broken pavements, he finally saw what he hoped to see – a grocery store on the ground floor of an apartment block, created by knocking together two adjacent flats. He went inside, looked over the humdrum products and pointing with his finger, indicated to the middle-aged saleswoman the items he wanted: bread, Greek yoghurt, sausages, cheese, green tea. He paid with a few banknotes and pocketed the change.

Back in the hotel, he emptied his trouser pockets on the table and poured out the coins. He got a thicker, heavier ten-rouble coin in change at the store. He remembered the feeling when he first picked up a pound coin – small, thick, weighty, with archaic formulas on the edge. He observed how the coins were decorated with different coats of arms: the English coat-of-arms, the Scottish thistle, the Welsh – what was Welsh? Maybe leopards? He established that the distinct coins with the different coats of arms were a legacy of the British Empire, over whose territory the sun never set. Just like in the Roman Empire, a variety of coins circulated side by side at the same time.

He looked at the ten-rouble coin, and examined it carefully, as if hoping to read something in it. For some reason, he remembered Borges' short story about Zahir, a mystical object: once you see it, you can't forget it, and eventually it obsessively captures all your thoughts. Zahir's reincarnation was a coin that Borges' character received as change in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. He smiled – one could hardly imagine a less

memorable object than a ten-rouble coin. He took it, thinking idly to himself that even such an insignificant artefact was a fairly accurate expression of the state that had created it, its ideology or mentality – whatever you call it.

The reverse side was reminiscent of the 1990s – a supposedly classical acanthus envelopping a centred number of supposedly modern design surrounded by vertical strokes. Inside the zero sign were secret spatial markings that become visible when the coin was tilted at an angle: this was very advanced for the time, almost cutting edge. The obverse was, of course, more important. The crownless double-headed eagle of the last decade – resembling a plump hen – had been replaced two years previously by a new eagle with the trappings of monarchy: three crowns, a sceptre and a globe, although formally Russia was a republic. The coin was surprisingly heavy for money of this value. And, like Russia, it was contradictory: on the reverse it depicted a modern state, on the obverse a historical tradition that no longer existed. A double-headed eagle attesting a claim to the succession of the Third Rome. The three crowns were not an attempt to return nostalgically to Romanov Russia – no, it was an assertion of Moscow's status as the Third – and last – Rome. That was where it really all began.

Absorbed in these thoughts, Tomas smeared yoghurt on the bread he'd bought, laid on pieces of spicy sausage like tiles and had his dinner, washed down with green tea. After dinner, he carefully locked the room, put a millimetre-sized piece of toilet paper in the keyhole – the paper would be displaced if you tried to turn the lock, and it was hard for the uninitiated to see it – and went down to reception. He needed to find out where the man whose footsteps he was following had stayed in Nizhnedvinsk a year ago. Perhaps this would help to reconstruct the man's route and the last days of his life.

He went downstairs in the lift and caught the eye of the receptionist, a grizzled middle-aged man in a dark brown suit and cherry-red tie over a shirt of the same colour. The tie stuck out above a bulging beer belly: his prominent roundness launched the broad end of the stiff synthetic tie into space, as if it represented the trajectory of a rocket lifting off from the globe. Looking into the receptionist's puckered, sly-eyed face, Tomas unceremoniously explained what he wanted and immediately reinforced his request with a fifty-dollar bill, which he placed on the counter and pressed with his thumb.

The note quickly moved to the hotel clerk's inside pocket. The man sat Tomas down at a desk in a cramped office, accessed by a door behind reception, and piled the registration books on it: thick, oblong, bound in brown wrinkled leather – old-fashioned items – and returned to his post. Tomas was happy – it seemed that the matter would be resolved quickly and easily.

He rejoiced too soon. He started flipping through the books and immediately discovered there were no entries at all for April 2017. One volume ended at the end of March and the other began on 1 May, and on that day, judging by the records, an unusually large number of people had checked in. At first, Tomas didn't believe his eyes, and combed the books from cover to cover, flipping through the pages in the cramped, stuffy room. He couldn't find the missing month.

Apart from that fact, both volumes looked authentic, they could hardly have been hastily falsified: the pages were numbered, filled in with different handwriting, there were seemingly different signatures, different pens, faded pages, tears, random stains...

The whole series of attributes and consequences of natural life that you could and should expect.

Turning the first volume over, he began to examine the spine, and pressing on the page, he carefully examined the binding. The pages were uncut and untorn, but the last sheet was incomplete. Someone had unpicked the binding, removed the April pages and painstakingly re-bound the book in the same leather. He compared the number of pages – yes, the second volume had seven more pages. This meant the pages were removed before the beginning of May, because the May entries had already begun in the new volume.

– Very strange, – the hotel clerk expressed surprise when Tomas pointed out the deficiency to him, but he couldn't get anything more out of him. The only reply was an indifferent – I don't know anything; the offer of an extra fifty dollars didn't help either: – Don't offer it, it's not necessary, I can't tell you anything else anyway.

– Is the absence of proof, proof of absence – or concealment? – Tomas asked himself ironically. And does the man's *не могу* – 'I cannot' – mean I cannot, or I may not?

Only much later would Tomas reflect on what he hadn't immediately appreciated: such concealment was absurd, it showed more than it concealed. After all, it would have been possible to falsify the page he needed, simply without the registration record of the person sought – unless...

Unless the people who tampered with it didn't know under what name and on what date the person had checked into the hotel – and assumed that he would have left a message in his check-in record for those who would follow in his footsteps.

But Tomas didn't think of it then – he wasn't thinking straight, he was tired after his trip – and shrugged his shoulders and went to bed, after taking all the precautions he could: he locked the door of the room as securely as possible, he stuck a chair under the handle, and placed a tin rubbish bin on the chair – any attempt to open it would cause a huge noise. He woke up from the awkward silence only when it was completely light.

Now, in the morning brightness, the town didn't seem to have changed. The same monotony of shabby architecture of a dormitory district, the same amorphous space of a town without a centre, extending in all directions in an equally senseless way. There were more passers-by – they were moving as if they were cowering, lost in their own thoughts and affairs, hurrying, but seemingly without a purpose. The concrete sky matched the greyness of apartment blocks whose colours had faded – or maybe they never had any. Even the vegetation – leafless birch trees, and bushes scattered unevenly between the pavement and the street – didn't add any life, but rather only accentuated the sense of disorder.

He glanced across the street – there weren't many people, so it wouldn't be hard to spot anyone tailing him – and turned left with a businesslike stride, dodging potholes in the pavement slabs and stagnant puddles with one or two patches of ice.

First, he had to get rid of those tracking him. Tomas knew what the textbooks and experienced teachers said in such cases: don't let on that you've noticed you're being followed, and don't try to shake off the trackers – unless you're at risk of falling into the clutches of an adversary with compromising documents or evidence. But now he simply had no choice. His very presence here was evidence.

He walked down one of the central streets, looking round, until his eyes, closely focused on the changing landscape of people, buildings and traffic, spotted an opportunity. Now he could see clearly who was following him. A man in his 40s and a woman of a similar age, acting as a married couple out shopping: the man was holding a plastic bag with their purchases. From time to time, they stopped at shop windows and pointed out something to each other, as if they were chatting – but they were too wooden, too synchronised, with movements that resembled parade ground exercises. And there was a young man in jeans and a leather jacket on the other side of the street, walking in parallel, occasionally forging ahead, keeping an eye out in case Tomas thought to make an unexpected turn into a side street. The tracking was unprofessional, textbook. Tomas already knew how he would get rid of them – he just needed the right opportunity.

Finally, after walking ten minutes down a long monotonous street, he saw what he was looking for – two identical shops in a typical Soviet-era building, separated from the street by a wide stretch of trampled land – the architects had planned to put a flower-bed here. One shop sold food, the other, on the right, curtains. Both in a long building that stretched along the street, the ground floor of which was occupied by offices, shops, dilapidated, musty premises, and the other floors by small apartments, old balconies with rusty railings piled high with household junk, and taut lines which were used in summer to hang laundry. A Khrushchyovka*. The entrances to the courtyard, which ran along the other side of the building, were a few hundred metres away – that was the critical thing.

Two shops side by side, like mirror reflections of each other. After a moment's consideration, Tomas turned left, towards a grocery store: at this time of day, goods would be delivered through the back entrance, which meant there was a better chance that the key would be left in the door to the yard. The shop was small, the trackers wouldn't dare to follow him within, and the windows were covered with adverts affixed from inside – it was impossible to see from the street what was going on within.

Tomas entered slowly, nodding silently to the shop assistant, a fifty-year-old lady with red chestnut hair, who, without taking much interest in him, continued to flip through a horoscope magazine with colourful covers. He stopped at the drinks shelf, as if pondering what to choose, waited, and looked around the premises. As he had expected, the agents following him didn't enter the shop, they were probably waiting outside, perhaps trying to peer through the cracks in the advertisement posters.

He couldn't stay choosing for very long, pretending to read the descriptions of the flattened brandy bottles. Those waiting outside would soon wonder where he'd got to. Fortunately, the door of the shop soon opened, and in walked a pensioner with a lively face and bushy black eyebrows contrasting with his completely grey hair. He had no sooner entered when he shouted cheerfully to the shop assistant, who beamed and put away the horoscopes.

– Great – there will be some conversation, – Tomas thought, and went to the counter to pay for a quart of brandy. While she was still handing him his change, the shop assistant turned away and started talking to the old man. Taking advantage of her dis-

* A Khrushchyovka was a large apartment building built in the Soviet Union when Nikita Khrushchev was party leader.

traction, Tomas made an unhurried but confident turn into the passageway leading to the warehouse and the service quarters. In the door to the courtyard, as he had guessed, a key was inserted from the inside. Turning it quietly, Tomas slipped out, noiselessly closed the door behind him, and looked around.

The yard was empty. The agents hadn't thought to go around the other side of the building. When, in a few minutes or so, the trackers realised he'd been spending a suspicious amount of time in the shop and entered to check, he would already be far away. A quick step, but not a run – why draw attention to yourself unnecessarily? – Tomas headed further in between the apartment blocks. After a while, he came out onto another street, perpendicular to the first, he crossed that one too, and passing through the courtyards, reached a further parallel street. Finding there a second-hand clothes shop, he bought a black half-length coat – it would change his silhouette, he would be more difficult to recognise. He changed his clothes on the spot in the yard of the apartment block, left his jacket folded by the rubbish bin, and put the recently purchased brandy quart on top.

– Some homeless person will be happy, – he thought. – Or not necessarily homeless. In this country it's not just homeless people and beggars who rummage for goodies in rubbish bins.

He walked out into the main street, and looked which way to turn – left or right? He felt like the detective in the Chesterton story, puzzling over where to go and where to start, because he doesn't know what he's looking for. So, just like the detective, he simply walked down the endless street, hoping that his gait, his posture, his gestures wouldn't betray his inner uncertainty. He waited for something to catch his eye, for an unexpected building, signboard or face to touch the edge of his consciousness and give direction to his thoughts and steps.

It was hard to believe that this whole odyssey of searching, discovery and hard-earned insights had led him here, to an amorphous, aimless city among the northern plains and marshes. He didn't come here of his own free will – would anyone come here of their own free will? He was following someone's steps – completely cold, year-old footprints. He still couldn't forgive himself for the fact that, a year ago, when it happened, he had left, disappearing to the other end of the continent, without a trace and out of contact. As if by staying behind he could have made a difference.