

**Yulian
Semyonov**

**...in the
performance
of duty.**

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

Moscow

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CHAPTER ONE

I

Strumilin reached for cigarettes as soon as he got into the car. He had been smoking a lot in the past five years, both before and after medicals.

"The old stickler!" he muttered angrily to himself, thinking of the elderly professor who had put him in a pressure chamber and pumped air out till it felt like flying at sixteen thousand feet without an oxygen mask. "Must enjoy giving people the jitters."

The old professor had shaken his head and sighed as Strumilin staggered out of the chamber, his face a sickly green.

"You're in bad shape, my dear fellow."

He had put Strumilin down as "Group 5". "Group 5" was on the fringe. Any lower

rating would mean a worthy and comfortable retirement. Good-bye to flying, good-bye to the Arctic.

Strumilin sat in the car smoking and staring at the clock on the dashboard. The longer he sat there the more angry he became. On his way out of the building, he had been asked for a lift by Fokin, of the transport department.

“I’ll only be five minutes.”

Ten minutes had passed and there was still no sign of Fokin. If there was one thing that annoyed Strumilin it was to be kept waiting, no matter by whom or for what reason. Flying in the Arctic had trained him never to be more than forty seconds late—a minute at the outside.

Back in 1933, when he had first become a pilot, he had been about five minutes late for take-off from Tiksi. Levakovsky, the captain of the aircraft, under whose command Strumilin had learned most of what he knew about flying, had smiled sourly.

“Being late is a habit of aged whores, pimps and neurotics. Punctuality is the courtesy of kings. I happen to be opposed to monarchy, but I’d rather have dealings with a punctual

archduke than a sluggardly Young Communist. *Vous comprenez?*”

Strumilin had blushed in confusion and spent the rest of the flight to the Island of Birds cursing himself for not having answered in French. A suitably ironic “*Oui, monsieur!*” might have damped the explosion of laughter that Levakovsky’s words had touched off among the crew.

Strumilin had flown with Levakovsky for four years and the man’s astounding punctuality had made a lasting impression.

Levakovsky had no time for navigators whose way of giving him an ETA was to say: “We should be there in about twenty-five or thirty minutes.”

“Would you mind giving me the ETA?” he would reply.

“I’ve given it you.”

“I want the exact ETA.”

The navigator would return huffily to his map and in a few minutes call out: “You will arrive in exactly twenty-seven minutes.” “Thank you,” Levakovsky would answer blandly, knowing very well why the navigator had stressed the “you”. The captain would then screw himself up into a tight little ball of concentration and in precisely twenty-

seven minutes the plane would touch down on the airfield.

At first Strumilin was irritated by what seemed to him a quite unnecessary and generally annoying rigidity, but as time went on he began unconsciously to imitate Levakovsky and get angry with any navigator who offered him an approximate reckoning.

After two years' flying with Levakovsky, Strumilin acquired the habit of staring at his watch if the person he was expecting was even a minute late. And, like Levakovsky, he would reprimand the late-comer regardless of rank or title.

When Strumilin came out for take-off one day, he found the whole crew waiting, except Levakovsky. Strumilin looked at his watch and gasped—the captain was three minutes late. When Levakovsky arrived fifteen minutes afterwards, Strumilin began complacently: "Being late is a habit of aged whores, pimps and...."

"... and neurotics," Levakovsky interrupted with a laugh.

When they were in the air and heading for Cape Chelyuskin, Strumilin discovered the reason for the captain's lateness. He had been

taking a radio message from Moscow telling him he had a son.

Strumilin looked at the clock on the dashboard again. Fokin was now fifteen minutes late. Well, next time he would be more punctual.

Strumilin threw away his cigarette and started the car. It leapt forward. When Strumilin was angry he drove very fast. The traffic militia on Kutuzovsky Prospekt knew his big black car and never stopped him for the offence of using the reserve lane in the middle of the road. They watched him with wistful smiles, because in their hearts they envied Strumilin. Small boys and militiamen envy polar fliers.

Strumilin did his own packing. He had always done so, even when his wife Natasha had been alive. Allowing himself plenty of time so that he need not hurry, he would choose each article with meticulous care and pack it away neatly into a large buff-coloured suitcase plastered all over with labels from every part of the world.

While he packed, he always sang the same song:

*Once a hunter did ride
In the fields so wide,
Where the birds fly high
In the great clear sky.*

Having packed his suitcase, Strumilin would lift it to make sure it was not too heavy. He hated struggling about with a bulging suitcase and having to change hands. This evening he got it right first time. He congratulated himself and set the case down on a low table near the front door. As he did so, he noticed that the big yellow label someone had slapped on his case at Basra airport was peeling off. He was about to remove it altogether when he remembered the old man. The old man had a hut not far from the jungle camp where Strumilin was spending a fortnight between flights. He was an interesting old man, wise and calm. He would sit for days on end warming his leg in the sunshine. He had a bad knee. And he kept coughing. Strumilin watched the old man's health slipping away from him as the days went by. One evening, when Strumilin was walking back from the airfield through a palm grove, he saw the old man. He was standing beside a tall palm-tree, weeping. After a time he put

his fingers round the warm, fragrant trunk of the tree and began to climb, gripping the thick ridges of bark with his feet. The palm was very tall and its bark had become as hard and firm as rock. It smelled of heat. The smell had the dry aromatic intensity of the desert. The old man's movements were calm and because they were calm, they were powerful. He did not cling close to the trunk, for this would have been a sign of fear. Ill though he was, he climbed the tree as a skilled horseman rides his horse, leaning back a little. The palm-tree, like the horse, is a friend of man. The horse carries him, the palm feeds him.

The old man climbed steadily, almost effortlessly, his body erect, his head thrown back so that he could look up at the tree's spiky crown, and through it to the sky.

"Why is he doing it?" Strumilin asked his interpreter quietly.

"The man is dying," his interpreter replied. "He is taking farewell of the sky."

Strumilin smiled to himself, lifted the case from a small table, placed it on the floor and went to look for some glue. He wanted to stick that Basra label firmly, so that it would not come off during his Arctic trip.

Zhenya came home at ten. Strumilin was sitting by the window smoking.

"What's the matter, Daddy?"

"Nothing, kid. Just smoking."

"Don't you feel well?"

"No, I'm all right," Strumilin said heavily. "Let's go somewhere and have supper? Or are you busy?"

"Of course not. . . ."

"Tired?"

"Not a bit," Zhenya lied, because she was, in fact, worn out after the day's filming. But her father seemed not quite his usual self; his shoulders were sagging and he looked old. She kissed him, patted his cheek and said, "I'll be ready in five minutes."

They drove to the Ukraina restaurant and took the only free table, which was very near the band.

"We shan't be able to talk," Strumilin said. "They'll deafen us."

"We'll shout."

"Then we'll be marched out like a couple of rowdies."

"Is it rowdyism to shout?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. If a man wants people

to understand what he's saying, he must say it quietly."

"When Daddy starts spouting aphorisms, it means Daddy's in a bad mood," Zhenya said smiling. "What is it, Dad?"

"I'll have a Kiev cutlet. What about you?"

This evasion made Zhenya quite sure he was in some kind of trouble. She looked round for a menu and noticed Nikki, the assistant cameraman, only a few tables away. He was with another man and two girls. The girls were the type a journalist friend of her father's called "sleep-easies". Nikki gave Zhenya a long, cool stare. She felt the chill of it on her cheeks. Strumilin also noticed Nikki, glanced at Zhenya out of the corner of his eye and looked away.

Handsome fellow, he thought. I expect he's a bastard. It occurred to him that he was afraid of handsome young men.

He glanced at Nikki again and his mind flashed back to the officer who had interrogated him in a Königsberg prison. Strumilin had been shot down near Pillau and taken prisoner when he was delirious from burns and bullet wounds. At first he was put in hospital and looked after. He longed for something sour and the mixture they fed him

in a spoon tasted sour. After he had been treated for a few days he was visited by an officer of the Luftwaffe. The officer amazed Strumilin by asking after his health in perfect Russian, with a genuine Vologda accent. Then he offered him a Turkish cigarette, pushed two full packets under his pillow and asked if he would like to read the newspapers.

Strumilin was silent.

The officer shrugged. "Shall we be frank?"

Strumilin again made no reply.

"Are you a person of intelligence or the usual type of Communist?" the officer asked with a trace of sadness in his voice.

"The usual type of Communist," Strumilin replied.

"I see. So we can't talk as gentlemen?"

"I can't, not with you."

"That's a pity. We are the army, you know, you could make a deal with us. The alternative is the Gestapo. You understand?"

"I understand."

"We don't want to know much. You used to drop small bombs, now they weigh a ton. Who designs them? Petlyakov, Mikoyan or Tupolev? That's all. We'll look after the rest. Do you understand?"

Strumilin turned away to the wall and

closed his eyes. That evening he went to prison and was at once thrown into the punishment cell. After two days he was brought before an interrogator.

The interrogator was a willowy young man, extremely handsome. He was very much like Nikki, but he never stopped smiling, even when Strumilin fainted with pain. The interrogator burned the half-healed burns with a match and smiled, and Strumilin moaned and fainted.

Strumilin brought himself back to reality with a jerk. I must be mad, he thought. What has this boy to do with it?

Ashamed of his thoughts, he looked guiltily at Zhenya and nodded in Nikki's direction.

"Fine lad, pity you quarreled with him."

"You can't quarrel with a coward."

"Are you sure he's a coward?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me why?"

"Of course. It's like this. Ryzhov has a temperature but he still comes to the studio because he won't take sick leave while the film is being shot. You know him, he's always worrying. Someone in Hollywood has worked it out that mortality is highest among producers up to the age of forty—heart failure

or complete nervous exhaustion. On the other hand, our chief cameraman takes the whole thing very calmly, and that person over there," Zhenya nodded towards Nikki, "used to complain to me all the time about the chief cameraman being so calm."

"But that's good."

"What is?"

"His being calm," Strumilin said with a laugh.

"He doesn't care. He just arranges the lights and lets the camera do the rest. He's too calm. He's calm to the point of indifference." Zhenya frowned. "Well, the other day we had a meeting and I got up and said we, young people, were worried about the quality of the camera work that had been done up to now. And the chief cameraman asked me 'what young people?' There were only two young people at the meeting—Nikki and myself. He stared at his boots and didn't say a word, though he had been talking about it to everybody in the corridors. He ought to have backed me up, but he didn't. It's worse than cowardice, it's dirty. And not even dirty in a big way. It's just a mean, petty act. I told him I didn't want anything more to do with him. But it hurts."

"Does it?"

"Well, not very much really," Zhenya replied quietly. "It's—well, it's like putting on a dress that's sopping wet."

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Bogachov was wondering whether to go down to the restaurant or have an early night and be first to report for duty in the morning at exactly 0900 hrs. But the sound of music floated in through the open windows. The band was playing in the restaurant downstairs. Bogachov was fond of jazz. He went through his notebook. The address pages were blank. He had bought the notebook only yesterday, mainly because he liked the imitation tortoise-shell binding. Before he left flying school, however, that great lover Pagnasyuk had given him a few Moscow telephone numbers.

"These are all girls in the extra-prima-puma class," he had said. "Oceans of tenderness, lots of chastity to spare, and so on. Dial a number, say a few gallant words and your evening is made for you. The rest depends on your initiative."

Bogachov took out Pagnasyuk's list of names and telephone numbers, sat down at the desk and dialled a number.

When he got through he asked for Rosa.

"Rosa!" someone shouted at the other end.
"Your Rosa's wanted on the phone!"

There was a long silence.

"Hullo," an old woman's voice croaked over the line. "Who is it you want?"

"Rosa."

"Is that Kolya?"

"No."

"Not Kolya, eh? Don't I know your voice? Well, your Rosa's not here. She's skipped off to the cinema."

Whoever it was rang off.

Bogachov dialled the next number and asked for Galya.

"Hold the line. Galya won't be a minute."

Bogachov lit a cigarette and started drawing little gnomes and women's legs on the hotel notepaper.

"Speaking," said Galya.

"So am I."

"Don't be funny. Who is it?"

"Bogachov."

"Who?"

"Pilot Bogachov."