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THE FUR HAT



**V L A D I M I R
V O I N O V I C H**

THE FUR HAT

VLADIMIR
VOINOVICH

Translated from the Russian
by Susan Brownsberger

A HARVEST/HBJ BOOK
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A B C D E

Whenever Yefim Semyonovich Rakhlin was asked what his next book would be about, he lowered his eyes, smiled, and replied, "I always write about decent people."

And his whole manner suggested that he wrote about decent people because he himself was decent and saw only the good in life, that the bad did not exist for him.

His heroes were members of the "fearless" professions—geologists, mountain climbers, cave explorers, volcanologists, polar research workers—men who struggle against the elements, that is, against a force free of ideology. This allowed Yefim to tell stories in which regional, district, and Party committees were little involved (a point of great pride with him), and at the same time to get his books out as fast as he wrote them (approximately one book per year), without any trouble with the censor or editors. Many books went on to become plays, film scripts, and radio and television shows. This had a very positive effect on the author's standard of living.

His five-room apartment was packed with imports: the living-room set was Rumanian, the bed Arabian, the upright piano Czechoslovakian, the television Japanese,

and the refrigerator was from Finland. He decorated the apartment with objects brought back from his many expeditions. Hung on walls, spread on the floor, arranged on windowsills, bookshelves, or special stands were antlers, a walrus tusk, a stuffed penguin, a polar-bear skin, a giant tortoise shell, dried starfishes and sea urchins, skeletons of deep-sea fish, Nanay moccasins, and Buryat and Mongolian clay figurines. As he showed the collection to visitors, Yefim would say reverently, "This was a gift from the petroleum workers. This, from the cartographers. This, from the speleologists."

In the press, Yefim's works were usually received favorably. True, it wasn't the literary critics who reviewed them, as a rule, but those same spelunks (as his friend Kostya Baranov called all fearless people, regardless of their profession). The reviews—I suspect Yefim wrote them himself—were all similar and had titles like "A Needed Book," "Useful Reading," or "A Fact Everyone Should Know." They said that the author knew the life of his heroes well and that he described the romance of their dangerous and difficult work authentically.

Yefim assured me that his characters—upright, handsome, one better than the next—were true to life. I was skeptical.

In my opinion, people everywhere are alike: even on an iceberg, a Soviet collective will have its careerists and its stool pigeons, and at least one KGB agent. And then, under conditions of isolation and prolonged separation from their homeland, even people of great courage may finally weaken and exchange jokes of dubious political content. And if their iceberg drifts to some Western shore, they might not all return.

When I expressed this thought to Yefim, he told me hotly that I was wrong: under extreme conditions, decent people rose to the challenge.

“What challenge?” I asked. “The challenge of returning or the challenge of not returning?”

In the end, Yefim would stop talking and purse his lips. There was no point arguing with me: in order to understand high ideals, one must have them oneself.

In Yefim’s novels you invariably had a fire, blizzard, earthquake, or flood—with such medical consequences as burns, frostbitten limbs, and drowning victims in need of resuscitation. The decent people would run, fly, swim, or crawl for help, would unhesitatingly share their blood, skin, extra kidneys, and bone marrow, or display their fearlessness in some other admirable way.

Yefim himself was fearless. He could tumble off a Pamir cliff, nearly drown in a polynya, or get burned fighting a fire at an oil well. At that same time he dreaded the number thirteen, black cats, viruses, snakes, dogs—and tyrants. Everyone he had to ask a favor of was a tyrant. Tyrants, therefore, included magazine editors, the secretaries of the Writers’ Union, policemen, janitors, ticket sellers, store clerks, and apartment-house managers.

Whether Yefim approached those tyrants with large or small requests, he would put on such a pitiful face that only the stoniest heart could refuse him. He was always groveling. He groveled for important things, like the reissuing of a book, and for the most unimportant, like a subscription to the magazine *Science and Life*. His campaign to have the *Literary Gazette* observe his fiftieth birthday with an announcement, a photograph, and some

sort of medal—one could write an entire short story about that. Even a novella. Yefim was only partly victorious in that battle. The announcement appeared without a photograph, and instead of a medal he got only a certificate of distinction from the Central Trade Union Council.

Yefim did have some metal decorations. Toward the end of the war, by adding a couple of years to his age in his documents (he was fearless even then), he got into the army, although he never made it to the front—his troop train was bombed and he was wounded. For his failure to participate in the war he was given the Victory Over Germany medal. Twenty years and then thirty years later he received anniversary medals for the same thing. In 1970 he got a medal in honor of Lenin's centennial, and in 1971, the Opening Up the Oil and Gas Deposits of Western Siberia medal. This medal was pinned on Yefim by the minister of oil and gas in exchange for a copy of his novel *Oiler*, which had been dedicated, however, to the oil workers of Baku and not of western Siberia. The above-mentioned medals added shine to Yefim's résumé and permitted him to remark modestly in biographical blurbs, "Have been decorated by the government." Sometimes instead of "government" he wrote "the army." It sounded better.

Yefim usually visited me on Thursdays, when he went to the store across from my house to be issued, as a war veteran, Polish chicken, fish sticks, a package of buckwheat, a jar of instant coffee, and a box of those stuck-together candied lemon wedges. He carried all this in a

large attaché case that held other groceries bought along the way, in addition to a couple of copies of his most recently published novel—gifts in case he met any useful people. The same attaché case also contained a new manuscript, which he always showed his friends, among whose number I was included. I'll never forget that thick yellow folder with brown strings and the inscription "File N^o."

Setting the attaché case on a chair, Yefim would carefully extract the folder and hand it to me as if embarrassed yet with the air of according a rare honor. Not everyone was so honored (and many, truth to tell, were all too glad not to be).

"You know how important your opinion is to me," he would say, averting his eyes.

Sometimes I tried to get out of it. "Why do you want my opinion? You know I quit criticism. They won't let a person do it seriously, and if you can't do it seriously, it's not worth doing. I work at the institute, I get a salary. I'm not about to start reviewing books. Not yours, not anyone's."

Then, blushing, he would assure me that he wasn't asking for an actual review—just my highly authoritative verbal opinion. And of course I always gave in.

One day, though, I blew up and said, not to Yefim but to my wife, "I'm going to tell him, this time, that I haven't read his book, that I don't intend to read his book, that I've had it up to here reading about decent people. Give me villains, give me losers, scum, Chichikov, Akaky Akakievich, Raskolnikov! A man who kills old ladies! A deserter who sells stolen dogs!"

"Now, don't get excited," my wife said soothingly.

“Look at the first few pages, at least. You never know, there may be something there.”

“I don’t even want to look. There can’t be anything there. A crow doesn’t suddenly start singing like a nightingale.”

“At least flip through it.”

“There’s no point even in doing that!” And I hurled the manuscript across the room. The pages went flying.

My wife walked out. After I cooled off a bit, I began to pick up the pages, glancing at them and waxing indignant over every line. I ended up flipping through the manuscript, reading several pages at the beginning, and glancing at the middle and the end.

The novel was called *Ore!* One of the members of a geological expedition breaks his leg. At first he fearlessly tries to conceal this fact. The nearest doctor is a hundred and fifty kilometers away, and unfortunately the expedition’s all-terrain vehicle has broken down. So the decent people decide to carry their comrade through rain and snow, through marsh and mud, in the face of incredible difficulties. The patient, though fearless, is not too bright. He asks his friends to leave him at the site, since they have discovered a vein of ore that the state badly needs. And if the state badly needs it, it is more precious to him than his own life. (For decent people, something is always more precious than their own lives.) The hero is naturally rebuked by his decent comrades. They will not think of abandoning him in his misfortune. The supplies are gone, no food, no tobacco, and the temperature falls below zero, but they carry their comrade all the way. They do not abandon him, they do not shoot him, they do not eat him.

It was clear. I jotted down a few notes on a sheet of paper and waited for Yefim. I would tell him the truth.

He came on Thursday as always, burdened with his stuffed attaché case. From it I was given a jar of poor man's (Bulgarian) caviar.

We talked about this and that, the latest Voice of America broadcast, our families, his son Tishka in graduate school, his daughter Natasha living in Israel. We discussed a certain very bold article in the *Literary Gazette* and weighed the chances of the Conservatives and Labourites in the upcoming elections in England. For some reason the Conservatives and Labourites in England always excited Yefim; he would repeat to me what Neil Kinnock had said to Margaret Thatcher and what Margaret Thatcher had replied to Neil Kinnock.

There was no avoiding it any longer. I told him, finally, that I had read the manuscript.

"Oh, very good!" With anxious haste he drew from his attaché case a medium-sized notepad with Yuri Dolgoruky on the cover and from his pocket a Parker pen (gift of the oceanologists). Then he looked at me expectantly.

I coughed. I could not begin right off with a devastating blow. Better to sweeten the medicine first by saying something positive.

"I liked . . ." I began, and Yefim, the pad supported on his knee, scribbled rapidly, diligently, leaving out not a word.

"But what I didn't like . . ."

The Parker pen lifted from the pad. A look of bore-

dom appeared on Yefim's face. He was looking at me, but he wasn't listening.

This was not deliberate; Yefim had the kind of mind that takes in only what is pleasing.

"You're not listening," I said.

"No, no! Why?" Flustered, he brought the pen back to the paper, poised to write, but still not writing.

"It seems to me," I went on, "that when a man breaks his leg, no matter how fearless and decent he is, he thinks about the leg—at first, at any rate—and not about the fact that the state needs ore of some kind."

"Cobalt ore," Yefim corrected me. "The government needs cobalt badly."

"Yes, I understand. Cobalt ore—of course we need it. But if it's been lying there millions of years, surely it can lie there a few more days. It isn't going anywhere. In the meantime, his leg . . ."

Yefim shook his head. He pitied me, a stranger to noble impulses, but he knew that it was fruitless to argue. If a man lacked something, he lacked it. So Yefim, continuing our discussion on a lower plane, asked what I thought of the overall structure of the novel, and of the *writing*.

The writing, as always, was abominable. But I saw in his eyes such a desperate desire to hear praise that my heart quailed.

"Well, the writing is . . ." I cleared my throat. "It's . . . all right." I looked at him and changed that. "It's not bad, it's . . . actually rather good."

He beamed.

"Yes, I think that the style . . ."

For such writing a man should be shot. But, with

Yefim looking at me, I mumbled that as far as style went, he was in good shape, though there were a few rough spots—

Here he reached into his pocket for a handkerchief or a Valadol, and I realized that even a few rough spots might be enough to bring on a heart attack.

“*Little* rough spots,” I hastened to add. “Anyway, that’s only my opinion, my subjective opinion, they’ve always criticized me for subjectivism, you know. But *objectively*, on the whole, this is good. Even terrific.”

“How did you like the part where Yegorov, on his back, looks up at the Big Dipper?”

Yegorov was the hero. I couldn’t recall anything having to do with the Big Dipper, but I said that I had loved it.

“And the scene at headquarters, in the chief’s office?” Yefim was spurring me to a higher pitch of enthusiasm.

Good God! What chief? I had thought that the action all took place outdoors, in the wild.

“Ah, yes, yes,” I said. “At headquarters. That was wonderful. And the title, don’t you think, is very appropriate,” I added, to get away from these details.

“Yes,” Yefim said, warming up. “Yes, I wanted something that would express the higher idea of the book. Because it’s not just the ore in the earth, it’s the ore in each of us. . . . Remember when they bring him to the hospital? And they see that silhouette in the frozen window?”

I didn’t remember that either, but I nodded approvingly. To avoid any further questions, I jumped up and congratulated Yefim on his success. Though I couldn’t look him in the eye.

My wife fled to the kitchen, and I heard her out there choking with laughter. But Yefim rushed over and shook my hand.

"I'm glad you liked it," he said excitedly.

After leaving me, he promptly spread the news of my praise all over Moscow. I got a phone call from Baranov. Lisping more than usual, Kostya wanted to know whether I really liked the novel.

"What's the problem?" I asked, on my guard.

"The problem," Kostya said angrily, "is that you are fortifying Yefim in the absurd idea that he's a writer."

For, you see, though Kostya was Yefim's closest friend, he never spared him. He considered it his duty to tell him the truth, no matter how unpleasant. I was surprised that Yefim stood it.

Yefim lived on the sixth floor of the writers' building near the airport metro station—a convenient stop. A clinic downstairs, the Literary Fund's cooperative across the way (a minute's walk), the metro to the left (two minutes), the Komsomol grocery to the right (three minutes), and just a little farther—within walking distance, as the Americans say—were the Baku Cinema, the Leningrad Road Farmers' Market, and the Twelfth Precinct police station.

His apartment was large, and it became even larger when his family was reduced by one-fourth, which occurred when his daughter left for her historic homeland, namely, Tel Aviv. Natasha's departure caused fireworks.

To understand the reason for the fireworks you have to know that Yefim's wife was an ethnic Russian—Zina Kukushkina, from Taganrog. Kukusha, as Yefim affectionately called her, was a round, bosomy, lusty, empty-headed lady with big ambitions. She smoked long foreign cigarettes that she got through her connections (“on the side,” as they say), drank vodka, sang bawdy songs, and swore like a trooper. She worked as a senior editor in television, the Patriotic Education Department, and produced the program “No One and Nothing Is Forgotten.” She was also secretary of the Party organization at the studio, a deputy to the District Soviet, and a member of the Science Society. But under her bra she wore a cross, and believed in mummification, telepathy, and the laying on of hands. In brief, she was a fully modern representative of our intellectual elite.

Kukusha had kept her maiden name to avoid blighting her career, and for the same reason had made both her children Kukushkins and registered them as Russians. Her strategy proved correct. She got ahead in her own career and did what she could to further her husband's literary progress.

Though well over forty now, she still had lovers. Military men, usually. Of these the most important was General Pobratimov, twice a Hero of the Soviet Union. He and Kukusha had become acquainted long ago, when he was still deputy minister of defense. The general recognized her on television. He was so smitten that he undertook to serve as consultant for the broadcast of “No One and Nothing Is Forgotten.” I am told that sometimes, when Yefim set out with fearless people on distant missions (or, as Kostya put it, in search of dumb-

ass adventures), Pobratimov would send a long black car with his aide, a short, potbellied colonel named Ivan Fedoseevich, to fetch Kukusha. And this would happen during the day, during working hours. Ivan Fedoseevich would enter the editorial office in a uniform bedecked with ribbons, greet all Kukusha's colleagues in a highly unmilitary manner, show all his gold teeth in a broad smile, and announce with a leer, "Zinaida Ivanova, you are expected at General Headquarters with the materials."

Kukusha would throw some papers into a folder and leave. What people said behind her back did not greatly concern her.

When the general himself visited Kukusha, a traffic policeman would first appear in front of her building: Then some men who looked like plumbers would arrive in two Volgas and station themselves around the premises. On these occasions, no matter what the weather, a couple, a pair of lovers, would sit on the bench at the entrance. While they drank wine from a bottle or embraced, the man would open the woman's blouse (so Kostya described the procedure to me) and murmur into her bosom, which probably cradled a hidden microphone. Next a taxi would appear and unload a citizen sporting dark glasses and a gray hat pulled low. The taxi driver, observant neighbors noted, was none other than Ivan Fedoseevich in disguise. As for his passenger—well, need we even ask?

Of all Kukusha's lovers, General Pobratimov was the most appreciative and lavish. Lately, though, he had not been able to do much: fallen into disfavor with the higher-

ups, he had been removed for “Bonapartism” and sent off to command a remote military base, with a marshal’s stars for consolation. But even in retreat he did not forget his friends: he helped get Tishka Kukushkin exempted from the army, and he fixed up Ivan Fedoseevich as military commissar of Moscow and facilitated his promotion to general.

Natasha Kukushkina, Yefim’s daughter, had been working as an interpreter at Intourist and planned to go to graduate school, until she met a junior research fellow from the Meat and Dairy Industry Institute, one Semyon Zimmerman, and bore him a son. The baby, at the father’s insistence, was named Ariel, in honor of (imagine!) the defense minister of Israel. Kukusha swore she would never acknowledge a grandson with such a name. She accepted the grandson eventually, but called him Artem.

The perfidious Zimmerman, meanwhile, was preparing an even more terrible blow for Kukusha. Natasha came home one day and announced that she and Senya (Zimmerman) had decided to move to their historic homeland, and she needed a certificate saying that her parents had no financial claims on her. Kukusha, horrified at this news, begged Natasha to come to her senses, to leave the cursed Zimmerman, to think of her baby. Kukusha reminded her daughter of all that she had done for her as a mother, of the gruel and cod-liver oil that had been fed her in childhood, of the Soviet regime that had given her an education, of the Komsomol that had nurtured her. She spoke of the terrors of capitalism, the Arabs, and the desert wind. She wept, took valerian drops,

got down on her knees, threatened her daughter with terrible curses.

The certificate, of course, she refused to give. Not only that, she wrote to Intourist, the Meat and Dairy Industry Institute, the Visa and Registration Department, and her own Party organization, asking them to save her daughter from the toils of the Zionist conspiracy. But evidently the Zionists had infiltrated the Visa and Registration Department too, because in the end Natasha was allowed to leave without the certificate.

Kukusha came neither to the farewell party nor to the airport. Yefim said good-bye to his daughter secretly and thereafter concealed the fact that now and then he picked up letters from Israel at the central post office.

From the letters he learned that Natasha and her husband had settled well. Senya (now called Shimon) worked at a munitions factory and was drawing a decent salary, and she worked in a library. They had just one disappointment. Ariel, three-quarters Jewish and considered a Jew in the USSR, in Israel turned out to be not Jewish but Russian, since he was born of a Russian mother. (And his mother, who all her life had concealed her Jewishness, was now also a goy, for the same reason.)

Surprisingly, their daughter's departure had no effect at all on Yefim and Kukusha's situation. The Young Guard Publishing House continued to publish his novels about decent people, as if nothing had happened. Kukusha worked on her "No One and Nothing Is Forgotten," headed the Party committee, and wore her cross under her bra. Tishka was finishing graduate school.

Life went on.