

Europe central

William T. Vollmann.



# VIKING

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Danilo Kiš, whose masterpiece  
*A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* kept me company for many years  
while I was preparing to write this book.

The majority of my symphonies are tombstones.

—D. D. Shostakovich

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## PATRONYMICS

For the convenience of my countrymen who lose their way in Russian novels.

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 Varzar [later Shostakovich], Nina Vasilyevna. *Nicknames*: Ninotchka, Ninusha, Ninka, Nita.  
 Vlasov, Andrei Andreyevich



EUROPE CENTRAL

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VIEW FROM A RUINED  
ROMANIAN FORT

---

(1945)



## STEEL IN MOTION



*As often as not, the things that attract us to another person are quite trivial, and what always delighted me about Blumentritt was his fanatical attachment to the telephone.*

—Field-Marshal Erich von Manstein (1958)

### 1

A squat black telephone, I mean an octopus, the god of our Signal Corps, owns a recess in Berlin (more probably Moscow, which one German general has named *the core of the enemy's whole being*). Somewhere between steel reefs, a wire wrapped in gutta-percha vibrates: *I hereby . . . zzzzzzz . . . the critical situation . . . a crushing blow*. But because these phrases remain unauthenticated (and because the penalty for eavesdropping is death), it's not recommended to press one's ear to the wire, which bristles anyhow with electrified barbs; better to sit obedient, for the wait can't be long; negotiations have failed. Away flees Chamberlain, crying: *Peace in our time*. France obligingly disinterests herself in the Prague government. Motorized columns roll into snowy Pilsen and keep rolling. Italy foresees adventurism's reward, from which she would rather save herself, but, enthralled by the telephone, she somnambulates straight to the balcony to declare: *We cannot change our policy now. We are not prostitutes*. The ever-wakeful sleepwalker in Berlin and the soon-to-be-duped realist in the Kremlin get married. *This will strike like a bomb!* laughs the sleepwalker. All over Europe, telephones begin to ring.

In the round room with the fan-shaped skylight, with Greek gods ranked behind the dais, the Austrian deputies sit woodenly at their wooden desks, whose black rectangular inlays enhance the elegance; they were the first to

accept our future; their telephone rang back in '38. Bulgaria, denied the British credits which wouldn't have preserved her anyway, receives the sleepwalker's forty-five million Reichsmarks. The realist offers credits to no one but the sleepwalker. Shuffling icons like playing cards, Romania reiterates her neutrality in hopes of being overlooked. Yugoslavia wheedles airplanes from Germany and money from France. Warsaw's humid shade is already scented with panic-gasps. The wire vibrates: *Fanatical determination . . . ready for anything.*

According to the telephone (for perhaps I did listen in once, treasonously), Europe Central's not a nest of countries at all, but a blank zone of black icons and gold-rimmed clocks whose accidental, endlessly contested territorial divisions (essentially old walls from Roman times) can be overwritten as we like, Gauleiters and commissars blanching them down to grey dotted lines of permeability convenient to police troops. Now's the time to gaze across all those red-grooved roof-waves oceaning around, all the green-tarnished tower-islands rising above white facades which grin with windows and sink below us into not yet completely telephone-wired reefs; now's the time to enjoy Europe Central's café umbrellas like anemones, her old grime-darkened roofs like kelp, her hoofbeats clattering up and bellnotes rising, her shadows of people so far below in the narrow streets. Now's the time, because tomorrow everything will have to be, as the telephone announces, *obliterated without warning, destroyed, razed, Germanified, Sovietized, utterly smashed.* It's an order. It's a necessity. We won't fight like those soft cowards who get held back by their consciences; we'll liquidate Europe Central! But it's still not too late for negotiation. If you give us everything we want within twenty-four hours, we'll compensate you with land in the infinite East.

In Mecklenburg, we've prepared a demonstration of the world's first rocket-powered plane. Serving the sleepwalker's rapture, Göring promises that five hundred more rocket-powered planes will be ready within a lightning-flash. Then he runs out for a tryst with the film star Lida Baarova. In Moscow, Marshal Tukhachevsky announces that *operations in a future war will unfold as broad maneuver undertakings on a massive scale.* He'll be shot right away. And Europe Central's ministers, who will also be shot, appear on balconies supported by nude marble girls, where they utter dreamy speeches, all the while listening for the ring of the telephone. Europe Central will resist, they say, at least until the commencement of Case White. Every man will be issued a sweaty black machine-carbine, probably hand-forged, along with ten round

lead bullets, three black pineapple grenades each not much larger than a pistol grip, and a forked powder horn of yellowed ivory adorned with circle-inscribed stars . . .

The telephone gloats: *Liberating advance . . . shock armies . . . ratio of mechanized forces.*

Across the next frontier, where each line of fenceposts leans away from the other, our shared victim's proud military poets dull all apprehensions by equating Warsaw 1939 with Smolensk 1634. While they dispose their hopeless echelons, we draw the Ribbentrop-Molotov Line, on which we stamp **GEHEIM**, which means *secret*. And why stop there? The sleepwalker gets Lithuania, the realist Finland. Our creed's a lamp whose calibrated radiance bows down into its zone. *It was and is Jews who bring the Negroes into the Rhineland. That is precisely why the Party affirms that Trotskyism is a Social-Democratic deviation in our Party.* The telephone rings; General Guderian receives his instructions to activate Case Yellow. We'll whirl away Europe Central's wine-tinted maple leaves and pale hexagonal church towers.

## 2

You won't get to watch it happen; they don't allow windows in this office, so you may feel a trifle dull at times, but at least you'll never be alone, since on the steel desk, deep within arm's length, hunches that octopus whose ten round eyes, each inscribed with a number, glare through you at the world. *The Pact of Steel . . . a correct decision . . . my unalterable will . . . rally round the Party of Lenin and Stalin.* In the bottom righthand drawer's a codebook whose invocations control the speeds and payloads of steel, but the octopus seems to be watching. Take the gamble if you dare; how well can those ten eyes see? The sleepwalker in the Reich Chancellery could tell you (not that he would); they're *his* eyes, lidless, oval, which imparts to them a monotonously idiotic or hysterical appearance; in the ditch outside, a hundred other open-eyed heads revert to clay, not that they have anything in common with the octopus, whose glare remains eternally sentient.

What about the mouthpiece? Is it true that it can hear your every breath through its black holes? In his underground headquarters with its many guards, the realist sits tired behind a large desk, awaiting the telephone's demands. Although he's good at hanging up on people with as much force as the soldier who slams another shell into our antitank gun, he's hanging up

on them, not on the telephone itself, which he can't live without. He subsumes himself in it, all-hearing; he knows when Shostakovich takes his name in vain. At the first ring he'll summon his generals to attend him at that conference table with its green cloth.

The sleepwalker's all eyes; the realist is all ears; their mating forms the telephone.

## 3

This consciousness may indeed derive, as the American victors will assert, from entirely mechanical factors: Within the bakelite\* skull of the entity hangs, either nestled or strangled in a latticework of scarlet-colored wires, a malignantly complex brain not much larger than a walnut. Its cortex consists of two brown-and-yellow lobes filamented with fine copper wire. It owns ideas as neatly, numerous arrayed as Poland's faded yellow eagle standards: *The camp of counterrevolution . . . German straightforwardness . . . the slanders of the opposition . . . the soundness of the Volkish theory.* It knows how to get everyone, from Akhmatova (who, visionary that she is, mistakes it for a heart of rose coral), to Zhykov (who fools himself that it can be played with), from Gerstein to Guderian, those twin freethinkers who dance alone within their soaring bullet-prisons in obedience to the telephone-brain's involution at the center of the shell.

Don't trust any technicians who assure you that this brain is "neutral"—soon you'll hear how angrily the receiver jitters in its cradle. Kollwitz, Krupskaya and the rest—it will dispose of them all, magically. It's got their number. (As the sleepwalker admonishes Colonel-General Paulus: *One has to be on the watch, like a spider in its web . . .*) In short, it will enforce the principle of unified command.

It makes the connection. It rings.

From the receiver, now clattering like a dispatch rider's motorcycle across the cobblestones of Prague, to the black cold body, runs a coil whose elasticity draws out the process of strangulation. (Thanks to this telephone, General Vlasov will perish in a noose of piano wire.) From the anus-mouth behind the dial extrudes another strand of black gut thinner and less elastic than the re-

\*If this organism does in fact reside in Moscow, then I presume that the cranial casing partakes of Soviet duralumin—an excellent variety, called *kol'chugaliuminii*, which was developed by Iu. G. Muzalevskii and S. M. Voronov.

ceiver's coil, and this pulses all the way to the wall socket. *Since this morning our troops have been . . .* Some frowning little Romanian blonde's in the way; we've got to shoot her. Now into the deep green forests of Europe Central! *The relationship of forces in the Stalingrad sector . . . ferro-concrete defense installations.* Can rubberoid sinews feel? How do I make them bleed? *Ruthless fanaticism . . . we'll find a way to deal with him.* They undulate now, as the telephone rings.

The telephone rings. It squats like an idol. How could I have mistaken it for an octopus?

Behind the wall, rubberized black tentacles spread across Europe. Military maps depict them as fronts, trenches, salients and pincer movements. Politicians encode them as borders (*destroyed, razed, utterly smashed*). Administrators imagine that they're roads and rivers. Public health officials see them as the black trickles of people dwindling day by day on Leningrad's frozen streets. Poets know them as the veins of Partisan Zoya's martyred body. They're anything. They can do anything.

## 4

In a moment steel will begin to move, slowly at first, like troop trains pulling out of their stations, then more quickly and ubiquitously, the square crowds of steel-helmeted men moving forward, flanked by rows of shiny planes; then tanks, planes and other projectiles will accelerate beyond recall. Polish soldiers feebly camouflage their helmets with netting. Germans go to the cinema to fall in love with film stars; when Operation Citadel fails, they'll be swooning over Lisca Malbran. Russian cavalry charge into action against German tanks; German schoolgirls try to neutralize Russian tanks by pouring boiling water down the turrets. Barrage balloons swim in the air, finned and fat like children's renderings of fish. Don't worry; Europe Central's troops will stand fast, at least until Operation Barbarossa! (Their strategic dispositions are foxed and grimed like a centuries-old Bible.) Steel finds them all.

Steel, imbued with the sleepwalker's magic sight, illuminates itself as it comes murdering. (Amidst the cemetery snowdrifts of Leningrad lie the confined and the coffinless. Steel did this.) The broad rays of light as a *Nebelwerfer* gets launched from its half track, those inform steel's gaze, mark steel's reach.

From the heavy, pleated metal of a DShK machine-gunsight, a soldier's gaze travels so that his bullet may speed true. Steel needs him to launch it on

its way, but don't the gods always need their worshipers? From the telephone's brain, thoughts shoot down insulated copper conductors. It's time to commence Operation Blau. The Signal Corps prepares to receive and retransmit the dispatch: *Defend the achievements of Soviet power . . . a severe but just punishment . . .* And already the telephone is ringing again! Who will answer? Maybe no one except the Signal Corps, whose flags, attached to arms evolved from human, can transform any command into a series of articulated colors. The telephone rings!

The telephone rings. The receiver clamps itself to a mouth and an ear. (Where did *those* come from? I thought they were mine.) Another order flies up the black cable, down the elastic coil, and into the ear: *Under no circumstances will we agree to artillery preparation, which squanders time and the advantage of surprise.*

The V-phone rings; the S-phone rings. Jackboots ring on Warsaw's uneven sidewalks. The Tyrvakians have mined their bridges with Turkish dynamite. *We believe, on the contrary, that the combination of the internal combustion engine and armor plate enable us to take our fire to the enemy without any artillery preparation . . .*

All across Europe, telephones ring, teleprinters begin to click their hungry teeth, a Signal Corps functionary waves the first planes forward, and velocity infuses steel-plated monsters whose rivets and scales shimmer more blindingly than Akhmatova's poems. Within each monster, men sit on jumpseats, waiting to kill and die.

Just in case, shouldn't we now call up our rectangles of knobbly reptile-flesh, each knob a helmeted Red Army man, the rectangles marching across the snow toward the Kremlin domes while chilly purple sky-stripes rush in the same direction, white cloud-stripes in between? They're dark icons, almost black. The telephone rings: Commence Operation Little Saturn. Everything becomes a mobile entity comprised of articulated segments. Don't worry. In the cinema palaces, Lisca Malbran will help us pretend that it isn't happening.

Here come the guns like needles on round bases, and the guns which protrude from between two grey shields, and the guns which grow out of steel mushrooms, and the guns as long as houses, anchored by chassis large enough for a crew of twenty, the guns whose barrels are as long as torpedoes and the wheeled guns with fat snouts and long flare suppressors. It's only a question of time and manpower. And so the mechanized hordes go rushing east and west across Europe.

## 5

Guarding itself against posterity's blame, the telephone has qualified itself: *Provided always that the operation obeys the following conditions: appropriate terrain, surprise and mass commitment.* Moreover, it warns, each component must be metallic, replaceable, reliable, rapid and lethal—In spite of mass commitment, there were not enough components. The operation will fail.

Someday, bereft of propellants, steel must fall to rest and rust. (The telephone pleads: *Mechanical reinforcement.*) Smiling wearers of the starred helmet will raise high the red banner, as filmed by R. L. Karmen. *Hold fast to the last bullet.* Then, in the shellshocked silence of Europe, *which squanders time and the advantage of surprise*, morgues and institutes will blossom through the snow. In one of them, in a windowless, telephoned recess, I sit at a desk, playing with a Geco 7.65 shell.

## 6

What once impelled millions of manned and unmanned bullets into motion? You say *Germany*. They say *Russia*. It certainly couldn't have been Europe herself, much less Europe Central, who's always such a good docile girl. I repeat: Europe's a mild heifer, a plump virgin, an R-maiden or P-girl ripe for loving, an angel, a submissive prize. Europe is Lisca Malbran. Europe's never burned a witch or laid hands on a Jew! How can one catalogue her jewels? In Prague, for instance, one sees dawn sky through the arched windows of bell-towers, and that sky becomes more desirable by being set in that verdigrised frame whose underpinning, the finger of the tower itself, emerges from the city's flesh, the floral-relieved, cartouched and lionheaded facades of it whose walled and winding streets have ever so many eyes; Europe's watchful since she's already been raped so many times, which may be why some of her eyes still shine with lamplight even now, but what good does it do to see *them* coming? The first metal lice already scuttle over her skin, which is cobblestoned with dark grey and light grey follicles. Europe feels all, bears all, raising her sky-ringed church-fingers up to heaven so that she can be married.

What set steel in motion? The late ~~ff~~-Obersturmführer Kurt Gerstein has counseled me to seek the answers in Scripture, meaning Europe Central's old Greek Bibles with their red majiscules and black woodcut engravings of terrifying mummies bursting up from narrow sarcophagi; a few dozen of those volumes survived the war. To Gerstein, *elucidation* became even more

magical a solvent than xylol, into which our forensicists immerse the identity documents dug up from Katyn Forest. (In that bath, inks bleached away by cadaveric fluid come back to life.) Have you ever seen a railroad tank car of fuel shot up by incendiary bullets? *Elucidation* must be even brighter than that! He asked himself what he dared not ask his strict father: Why, why all the death? His blood-red Bibles told him why.

The telephone rings. It informs me that Gerstein's answer has been rejected, that Gerstein has been hanged, obliterated, ruthlessly crushed. It puts the former Field-Marshal Paulus on the line.

Paulus advises me that the solution to any problem is simply a matter of time and manpower.

So I apply myself now, on this dark winter night, preparing to invade the meaning of Europe; I can do it; I can almost do it, just as when coming to a gap in the wall of some ruined Romanian fort, one can peer down upon thriving linden treetops; you can see them waving and massing, then far away dropping abruptly down to the fields. ►

# PINCER MOVEMENTS

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(1914-1975)



## THE SAVIORS: A KABBALISTIC TALE



### 1

The tale of Fanya Kaplan, that darkhaired, pale-faced, slender idealist, tells itself with grim brevity in keeping with her times. For just as tyrannicides spurn slow justice, so likewise with tyrants. Between exploit and recompense lay only four days, which in most histories would comprise but an ellipsis between words, a quartet of periods, thus: . . . —but which, if through close reading we magnify them into spheres, prove to contain in each case a huddle of twenty-four grey subterranean hours like orphaned mice; and in the flesh of every hour a swarm of useless moments like ants whose queen has perished; and within each moment an uncountable multitude of instants resembling starpointed syllables shaken out of words—which at the close of this interval, Fanya Kaplan was carried beyond *Tau*, final letter of the magic alphabet. Her attempt took place on 30 August 1918. It is written that after Lenin fell, the young assassin hysterically fled, but then, remembering that the moral code of the Social Revolutionaries required her to give up her life in exchange for her victim's, stopped running, turned back, and in trembling silence surrendered to our security forces. On 3 September, Fanya Kaplan, who happened to be noted for her "Jewish features," was led into a narrow courtyard of the Lubyanka and there shot from behind by the commandant of the Kremlin himself, P. D. Malkov. (That luminary I. M. Sverdlov, who'd already played so indispensable a role in the liquidation of the Romanov family, instructed Malkov: *Her remains are to be destroyed without a trace.*) Thus the life and works of the blackhaired woman.

The tale of Lenin's bride, N. K. Krupskaya, makes for a happier parable.

And doesn't the parable possess greater integrity, greater righteousness we might almost say, than any other literary form? For its many conventions weave a holy covenant between the reader, who gets the mystification he craves in a bonbon-sized dose, and the writer, whose absence renders him divine. Granted, those very stringencies sometimes telescope events into dreamlike absurdity. In Krupskaya's case, were it not for her nearly accidental marriage she'd surely have remained as hidden to history as the silent letter *Aleph*. What was she then in her maiden days? We don't want to call her a cipher; we can't deny that her parable, like ours, began with birth. But in this genre (as in the lyric poem) there can be no random causes. Every death must occur for good reason. Every word, right down to its gaping letters *o* and grinning letters *e*, must offer resonance with sentences before and beyond—not predictability, mind you, for that would be tedious, but after each comma the hindsight reader needs to be in the position of saying: Why didn't I see that coming? Fanya Kaplan, for example, was never notified that she'd been condemned to death. And yet when Malkov's very first bullet exploded between her shoulderblades, she experienced coherence, and screamed not with surprise, but with desperate fear and outrage against inevitability.—As for Krupskaya, call her the darling of parable-mongers; introduce her as *the perfect personification of convention*. (This is why her collected works are so deadly dull.) Trotsky patronized her; Stalin by the end commanded her; Lenin himself merely used her. Historians regard her as a faithful mediocrity. I myself have always read in her a striving toward kindness, for which I offer praise. Unutterably typical of her epoch—and thus perhaps curiously akin to Fanya Kaplan—she was agitated all her life by *fervor*. Just as the same letter may appear in two words of contrary meaning, so the lives of those two women write themselves in nearly identical characters. Who am I to find in Krupskaya's enthusiasms anything alien to Fanya Kaplan's? One loved the Revolution; the other hated it. What force transformed them into opposites, if they were opposites?

## 2

We read that Krupskaya was first (that is, before her parable is supposed to begin) a pious little girl who prayed to the icon in her bedroom, then a rapacious Tolstoyan. In company with her friends she attacked a wealthy factory owner with snowballs. We find her cutting hay to help hostile and uncomprehending peasants at age fifteen, then teaching night classes in literacy to factory workers at twenty-two. She was one of those souls who long more

than anything to be of use in this world. Unknowingly she found herself drawn to the letter *Cheth*, which resembles the Greek letter *pi* and which, thus visually representing a gate, refers to ownership. She yearned to give herself, to be possessed, to know where she stood.

By the time she was twenty-six, she was receiving, materializing and carrying to underground printers the invisible-inked manifestoes which Lenin sent from prison. The legend says that one of her greatest joys was to watch the magic letters appear in the boiling water, as if they comprised a secret message written expressly for her, instead of being merely another metallically impersonal appeal to the workers. (After all, reader, don't you prefer to believe that this story which you're taking the trouble to read has something to say to you?) But for just the same reason that she shunned fashionable clothes, chocolates and other frivolous pleasures, Krupskaya strove to persuade herself that in the self-abnegation of *transcription* lay her destiny.

When she reached the age of twenty-seven, N. K. Krupskaya was arrested for the first time. After two months in preliminary detention, they released her, thinking her to be a shy nobody who'd gotten mixed up in illegal activity only by mistake, but so brazen and exalted were her actions on behalf of the Kostroma strikers that she was arrested again after only eighteen days.

Here again I seem to see that pallid, protuberant-featured Social Revolutionary woman who sought to kill Lenin. It's said that Fanya Kaplan had already become a committed anarcho-terrorist by the time she was sixteen. When the gendarmes burst in, she and her comrades were arrayed around the bed, carefully assembling the components of a bomb, like those Kabbalists who in their circle-beset diagrams arrange into bristling molecules the various emanations and manifestations of God. It's even said that the police themselves were moved by the perfection of the urchin-spined grey spheres laid out upon the young girl's white sheets. Fearing for the Tsar's safety, the court at first condemned her to death, but in view of her youth and sex the sentence was commuted to hard labor for life in Siberia. There she dwelled between the river-ice and the celestial alphabets of constellations until the October Revolution amnestied her. By then Fanya Kaplan was more determined than ever to redeem all Russia from centralist abomination.

As for Comrade Krupskaya, who proved equally unrepentant, they kept her in the blankness of the cells for five months, until a convict named M. F. Vetrova burned herself to death to protest her own fate. So in garments of flame this woman (otherwise almost unknown) dictated her tale of righteousness. Who says that tales are only words? Embarrassed by Vetrova's

propaganda triumph, the authorities felt compelled to exercise upon their remaining female prisoners the same leniency which they would grant Fanya Kaplan. In March of 1897, not long after her twenty-eighth birthday, they freed Krupskaya on grounds of failing health. (Fanya Kaplan for her part was also twenty-eight when she was freed forever by Malkov's bullets.)

A photograph from this period reveals Krupskaya's pale, stern beauty. Her smooth forehead glows like winter sunshine on a snowy field, her clenched lips cannot entirely deny their own sensuousness, and her eyes gaze with painful sincerity into the ideal—dark eyes these, longing eyes from which a craving for meaning steadfastly bleeds. Her high and proper collar hides her almost to the chin, so she's but a face, closed but promising something, like a flower-bud. She's combed her hair severely back, and cropped it short; she's a recruit, a fighter, a militant.

## 3

Knowing that Lenin needed a copyist in his Siberian exile, and learning that she too would be exiled (the police themselves being not entirely illiterate readers of dangerousness), she accepted her leader's proposal for a marriage of convenience, replying in those famous words, meant to show her imperviousness to bourgeois institutions: *Well, so what. If as a wife, then as a wife.*—In fact there is every reason to believe that beneath this bravado lived an idolatrous passion.—Upon her arrival the following year, when Fanya Kaplan was celebrating her tenth birthday, the reunited atheists submitted to a full church wedding in Shushenskoe, which is wistfully called "the Siberian Italy."

The law required an exchange of rings; and devotees of that most Kabbalistic genre, the parable-within-a-parable, might well concentrate on this most pathetic episode of the ceremony, unable to resist dissecting the ironic symbolism of those two copper wedding bands lying side by side on the black velvet cushion.\* It's said that when the eternally virginal Krupskaya first saw

\*Exegesis easily uncovers other ironies: The purple-cloaked priest, it is written, was as exasperated as his victims, because this marriage prevented him from renting the extra room of Lenin's house which the bride and her mother would now occupy. (Had she remained unmarried, Krupskaya would have been remanded to the locality of Ufa.) And perhaps he scented the godlessness of the convict spouses. What must he have made of Krupskaya's abashedness, Lenin's sarcastic smiles? How might he have proceeded, had he understood that this church of his, by sealing the union of these two helpmeets, was hastening its own destruction, and his?

them, she blushed. Freshly worked copper has a peculiar brightness, like bloody gold. We need not detain ourselves here with mystic correlations and analogies, God being ineffable anyway; it seems that the raw luminosity of the rings exposed her unacknowledged feelings in their revelatory glare. They'd been fashioned by a Finnish comrade who was still learning the jeweler's craft—indeed, he was indebted to Krupskaya for his tools, so he'd taken special pains, inscribing them with the names of the bride and groom in characters which in their squat angularity might well have graced some seventeenth-century diagram of astrology's nested spheres. In their shape the rings are said to have resembled the letter *Samekh*—a sort of o which tapers as it rejoins its starting point, and which sports a tiny bud on top, imagined by dreamy brides to be a precious stone. Need I add that this character of the mystical alphabet symbolizes both *help* and *sleep*? (Recall Marx's ambiguous proverb: Religion is the opium of the masses.)

Who knows the fate of those shining circlets? The ring which Krupskaya slipped upon Lenin's finger was never seen again. As for the one he slid onto hers, she removed it immediately, for the sake of revolutionary convention. Then the ceremony was over, and they walked home by separate ways.

So she became both drudge and disciple, the good soldier, the bedfellow (or occasional bedfellow as I should say, for in their Kremlin suite each spouse had a private room and a single-width metal-framed bed\*), the harmless mediocrity, the liquidator of pessimism, the amateur who transcribed Lenin's essays and sewed his nightshirts. (That German Communist Clara Zetkin, more glamorous than Krupskaya by far, visited the happy couple before and after the Revolution; her memoirs indulgently commend the wife's "frankness, simplicity and rather puritanic modesty.")

He called her Nadya. She called him Volodya.

## 4

On that August day two decades later, when the darkhaired, pale-faced, slender woman approached Lenin's Rolls-Royce, then took shaky aim with her little Browning as a line of hysterical determination sank from each corner of

\*Upon his own escape from Siberia to England in 1902, Trotsky had likewise found them working in separate quarters. "Nadyezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya . . . was at the very centre of all the organization work," he writes in his memoirs. "In her room there was always a smell of burned paper from the secret letters she heated over the fire to read."

her tight-compressed lips, the supreme deity of the Soviet Union ought to have been gathered in, rising to the heart of heaven just as letters of the Hebrew alphabet are said to take wing during the course of certain Kabbalistic raptures. Certainly Fanya Kaplan (alias Dora) was banking on that when she gave herself up in observance of the covenant *a life for a life*. But the black-haired woman, member in good standing of the Social Revolutionary Combat Organization though she was (which is to say, self-spendthrift), lacked competence. One cannot forbear to recall the half-built bomb on her girlhood's bed. Was the premature ending of that story mere bad luck, or had she and her accomplices forgotten to post sentries? (In this connection we'd do well to invoke the letter *Daleth*, whose shape—the upper righthand angle of a square—implies both knowledge and unenlightenment, being a door which can open and close. The young anarchists had faith\* that the door would stay closed until they'd completed their preparations to murder the Minister of the Interior. The police forced it open. Either way, the tale would have gone on, and the door remained.) What else should we expect? So many revolutionaries are intellectuals, a class of people whose aspirations tend to run ahead of their capabilities. Just think of that Paris Commune of the previous century who used to sit in cafés, constructing such beautiful little barricades out of breadcrumbs that everyone admired him; come the uprising, he built a perfect barricade out of stones—and the troops marched around it. (Shall we interject here that Krupskaya was perfectly useless with a gun, and that her attempts at cryptography brought smiles to the lips of Tsarist police spies?)

With typically hysterical exoticism, Fanya Kaplan had incised her bullets with dum-dum crosses so that they represented magic atoms, then dipped them in a substance which she believed to be curare poison, but which would prove to exert no effect whatsoever. Then she set out to try her luck. As soon as Lenin had completed his Friday address to the workers, she fired three shots which hummed like the letter *Mem*. One pierced a woman who was complaining about the confiscation of bread at railroad stations. The second shot struck Lenin in the upper arm, injuring his shoulder. The third soared upward through his lung into his neck, coming to rest in a

\*Blind faith, one might say. In Siberia she went literally and mysteriously blind for three years, but upon her blindness was engraved the secret alphabet of her cause. Under the influence of the terrorist Spiridovna, she swore to be patient, and someday to execute justice. And then, as if by magic, the world revealed itself once more to her sight.

fortuitous spot (if any bullet wound can be considered such). Lenin's face paled, and he sank to the running board, bleeding, unconscious.

## 5

The Cheka sent a car for Krupskaya without telling her anything. She was in terror; that day the leading Chekist Uritsky had already been assassinated. At such moments, when we find ourselves in danger of losing the protagonist we love, the tale of our marriage begins to glow, and the letters tremble on the page as once did our own souls when we realized the inevitability of the first kiss. Later, if he lives, those same words will go dry and stale. But for now the beloved Name trembles in every constituent, and we feel weak and sick. Krupskaya had already begun to suffer from the heart condition which would underline the remaining chapters of her life. She felt half suffocated. Her vision doubled; the streets of Moscow shimmered with tears. When, penetrating the magic circle of Latvian Riflemen, she found her husband apparently dying,\* she composed herself and gripped his hand in silence. (Years later, she'd be dry-eyed at his funeral.) He was lying on his right side. They said he'd opened his eyes when the car pulled up; he'd wanted to ascend the stairs himself. In the secret pocket of her dress, her fingers clasped the copper ring he'd given her in Shushenskoe.

The doctors had already cut his suit off. Lenin's eyes would not open. He breathed with the desperate, shallow gasps of a lover nearing orgasm; and, as if to reinforce this impression, a curl of blood had dried upon his paper-white chest in the shape of the letter *Lamed*, whose snaky shape has Kabbalistic associations with sexual intercourse.

At dawn his breaths deepened, and then he looked at her. Krupskaya whispered: We have no one but you. Stay with us; save us . . .

To comfort her, one of the nurses (who herself was weeping) said: He needs you, Nadezhda Konstantinovna.

Then they all began to heal him, giving him injections with a squat glass syringe whose shape was reminiscent of the letter *Qoph*, emblem of inner sight.

\*Arguably Fanya Kaplan had, as exegetes like to say, "wrought better than she knew," since the bullet remaining in Volodya's neck proved to be a time bomb. Nearly three years later, the doctors finally decided to remove it, and although the operation was a success, scarcely two days later he suffered the first of the cerebral hemorrhages which were to carry him off.