A BRIEF HISTORY OF PAINTBALL IN MOSCOW

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One has Jean Paul Sartre in his pocket
And proudly knows it,
Another sometimes plays his *bayan*[1] . . .

B. G[2]

There is no higher or more noble goal in art than to arouse mercy and indulgent gentleness toward others. And they, as each of us knows, aren't always worthy of this, far from it. It's for a good reason that Jean Paul Sartre said, "Hell—it's the others." These are truly surprising words—it's rare for such an amount of truth to be squeezed into a single sentence. However, for all its depth, this maxim is insufficiently developed. To acquire definitive completeness, "Jean Paul Sartre—that's hell, too" must be added to it.

I'm really not saying this so that I can once again reprimand the French leftist philosopher in the dusty pocket of my intellect. I have enough to be proud of as it is. I simply have to find some smooth way of changing the topic to people who "play on the bayan" or, to translate this expression utilizing the criminal jargon found in police dictionaries from the TransSib and Magnitka[3] days, use firearms to shoot each other.

And so we've changed the topic—I hope that the reader occupied with thoughts of Sartre didn't experience any discomfort as this took place.

Yakov Kabarzin, nicknamed "Kobzar,"[4] the leader of the Kamennomostovsky criminal group and the eminent ideological Soskovets[5] of the criminal world, without a doubt had the right to put himself in the category of "shooters." It's true he hadn't taken a gun in his own hands for a long time now, but it was precisely his will, which passed

through the nerves and muscles of various thugs, "boys," and other mechanisms of the simplest kind, that was the cause of the great number of sensational deaths described in detail on the front pages of Moscow tabloids. Not one of these killings was engendered by his cruelty or rancor; only the inexorable laws of the market economy impelled Kobzar to take extreme measures. In terms of his character he was indulgently gentle, sentimental within reasonable limits, and inclined to forgive his enemies. This came through even in his nickname, somewhat unusual for a thieves' culture which, in choosing a totem, prefers inanimate, hard objects like clothes iron, nail, or globe.

He was given that nickname still in school. The point is that Kobzar wrote poetry from childhood and, like many famous historical figures, considered the important thing in his life to be precisely poetry, not the administrative operations for which his contemporaries valued him. Moreover, as a poet he enjoyed a certain recognition; his short poems and longer narrative ones, full of moderate patriotism, Nekrasov's[6] social pathos (with a not fully clear addressee or sender), and love of the simple and unpretentious nature of the north appeared still in Soviet times in various almanacs and collections. The *Literary Gazette*, in its section "Congratulations to those celebrating a jubilee," several times printed comments about Kobzar, decorated with what looked like a sketch of his passport photo (because of the peculiarities of his work, Kobzar didn't like to be photographed very much). In a word, among the morose criminal bosses on the eve of the third millennium, Kobzar occupied approximately the same place as that of Denis Davydov[7] among the partisans of 1812.

Therefore, it's not surprising that such a man would want to change the bloody confrontations with firearms—which in Moscow alone provided a living for no less than a thousand journalists and photographers—to a more civilized form of settling mutual claims.

This thought occurred to Kobzar in the casino "Yeah, Bunin!"[8] that had just opened when, half-listening to the famous smash hit "Gang Members, Don't Shoot Each Other,"[9] he was thinking about Russian history and weighing whether to place his next bet on black or red.

It so happened that at that very moment the TV, secured directly over the gambling table to distract the players, was showing some American movie in which the characters, vacationing in a natural setting, were shooting each other with a colorful paint from paintball

guns. Unexpectedly, the program changed and famous scenes of a bank robbery from the film *Heat* began to flicker on the screen.

Kobzar thought with sadness that the "action" genre, which in the civilized world relieves the littered sub-conscious of millions of fat old ladies consuming pizza in front of the TV as they wait for death, for some reason in gullible Russia becomes a direct guide to action for the flower of youth and, no one, absolutely no one, understands that the large-caliber rifles in the hands of elderly movie heroes are simply a metaphor and a sedative for menopause. At that moment a waiter who was passing by tripped and a yellow stream of egg liqueur splashed out of the tipped glass onto Kobzar's white jacket.

The waiter turned pale. White fire flared in Kobzar's eyes. He examined the yellow stains on his chest carefully, raised his eyes to the TV screen, then lowered them at the waiter, and stuck his hand in his pocket. The waiter dropped his tray and staggered back. Kobzar took out his hand—in it was a crumpled wad of hundred-dollar bills and several large chips. Cramming all this into the breast pocket of the waiter's jacket, he turned around and quickly headed for the exit, dialing a number on his tiny "Motorola" as he walked.

The next day on one of the highways near Moscow seven black limousines with tinted windows and a gold Rolls-Royce with two flashing lights on the roof went by, spaced far apart. Each car was followed by jeeps with guards in them. The police cordoning off the area kept an arrogantly important silence; wild rumors circulated that somewhere near Moscow a secret summit of the big eight was taking place or, as one critically thinking newspaper delicately put it, the "group of seven and a half." But people in the know understood everything after they recognized the gold Rolls-Royce as Kobzar's car.

Using his authority as the spiritual Soskovets, in just one evening Kobzar placed calls to the leaders of the seven largest criminal groups and set a general meeting in a suburban restaurant, "The Russian Idea," well-known for similar meetings.

"Brothers," he said, looking round with the burning eyes of a prophet at the leaders sitting at the round table. "I'm not a very young man any more. And to tell the truth, not young at all. And I no longer need anything for myself. At least because I've had everything a long time already. If someone wants to say it's not true, let him spit it out and say so right now. Let's take you, Varyag.[10] Maybe you think I still want

something I don't have?"

"No, Kobzar," Kostia Varyag the thief from Kaliningrad answered, who was called that not because of his Nordic looks, as many mistakenly thought, but because the Ukrainian mob invited him several times to Kiev as an observer, as Riurik[11] had been at one time. "Indeed, you do have everything. And if you don't have something, I can't imagine what such a thing could be."

"You speak, Aurora," Kobzar turned to the leader from Petersburg.

"What else could you want, Kobzar?" pensively responded Slavic Aurora, who was famous in criminal circles for his legendary shot from an artillery gun aimed at the dacha of the intractable Sobchak.[12] "You have everything except perhaps your own space station. And it's because you don't need it. And if you needed a space station, Kobzar, I'm confident you'd get one. You have a gold Royce with two flashing lights on the roof, but those flashing lights don't impress me. Any piece of trash can put those on for himself. I'm impressed by something else—you're the only one in the world who—it's just amazing!—has all zeroes for numbers on his license plate. That can't be so, but it is. So you've understood something about life that we don't know. And we respect you for it like an older brother. So spit it out—your mates in this life also want respect for themselves."

Slavic Aurora loved to express himself metaphorically and in a multi-layered way. He was feared because of this.

"Fine," Kobzar said, realizing that the ritual of praising him could be considered completed. "Everybody believes I have everything. The important thing is I believe it myself. Therefore you won't think that I have to make a deal just for me personally. I'm thinking about our whole big family, and this time you can consider my mind with all its thoughts as our communal fund. Listen up. Here's the thing . . ."

And Kobzar expounded his idea. It was simple to a primitive level. Kobzar reminded them that the brotherhood had tried many times to divide spheres of influence once and for all, and each time a new war proved that it was impossible. "And this is impossible," he said, "for the very same reason it's impossible to build communism. Our most important father doesn't want this, the one who added an awful lot of the human factor to the clay from which he molded us . . ." And he motioned expressively upwards.

His comrades-in-arms began to hoot in approval—everybody liked

Kobzar's words. Because at the table sat people for whom that stupid anecdote about a gymnast[13] whom someone supposedly wanted to remove from the cross was insulting. In fact the gymnast did not bother anyone.

"But every time," Kobzar continued, "one of our boys is being buried and everybody follows his coffin—both his friends and yesterday's enemies—it doesn't feel quite right because of the bitter absurdity of such a death."

He looked round at the gathering with an expressive look. All were nodding in agreement.

"Life can't be stopped," Kobzar said after pausing theatrically. "No matter what we decide right now, all the same we'll be dividing up this world again tomorrow. So that new blood enters the veins, the old blood has to flow out of them. The question consists of something else: why should we really die doing this? Why should we help the trash fulfill their rotten plan for their struggle with us?" No one could give a clear answer to this. Only the Kazakh boss Vasia Chuiskaya Shupa took a deep drag on his cigarette and asked, "And how do you propose we die? Fake it?"

Instead of answering him, Kobzar took out a box from under the table, opened it, and showed the tense brotherhood some kind of strange instrument. On the outside it resembled the fashionable Czech automatic "Skorpion," but it was more crudely made and gave the impression of being a toy. Over the barrel it had a tube like an optical gun sight, only thicker. Kobzar aimed this strange weapon at the wall and pulled the trigger. The quiet chatter of the weapon resounded ("like a whip with a silencer," Slavic Aurora muttered) and red spots appeared on the wall—as if behind the wallpaper there was some dystrophic informer with whom retribution had finally caught up. In Kobzar's hands was a paintball gun that shoots balls filled with gelatin and dye.

His idea was brilliant and simple. In order "to resolve problems," there really was no need to actually kill each other. In any shooting, a paintball cartridge could replace live cartridges, if all the shooters striving to remake the world would voluntarily assume the responsibility of giving up the business in the event of their conditional death, leave Russia within forty-eight hours, and not undertake any retaliatory actions. In a word, pretend that they really had died.

"I think, brothers, we all have a place we can go to," Kobzar said, looking dreamily into the squinting eyes of his companions-in-arms.

"You, Slavik, have your chateau in the Pyrenees. You, Kostik, have so many islands in the Maldives Archipelago that it's all but impossible to understand why people still call them the Maldives. I have a few places as well . . ."

"We know, Kobzar, that you do."

"So let's drink to our peaceful old age. And let's prove to those louts that we're not a gang of pickpockets from Kursk Station but truly organized crime. In the sense that if we embark on something in an organized way, we'll get what we want done."

In a few hours the agreement was concluded. The problem of control seriously worried the participants, and they agreed that any one of them who tried to violate the agreement would have to deal with all the rest.

The first result of the agreement was that the cost of paintball equipment rose sharply. The owners of two small stores where the weapons and paint were sold made a fortune in two weeks. All the TV channels showed their faces drunk with happiness, and in this context the newspaper "Izvestiya" made a cautious prediction about the beginning of the long awaited economic boom. True, the merchants soon went bankrupt because with all the money they had made they bought a huge amount of equipment used in paintball—masks, coveralls, and visors—for which no demand arose. But the newspapers didn't write about it.

Not without some tension in Moscow criminal circles, guesses were made as to who would become the first victim of the new method of resolving problems. That turned out to be Suleiman, the representative of the Chechen crew. He was shot from three paintball guns right at the Karo Club as he was walking from the door to his Jeep to get a fresh supply of coke. Since this was the first shooting that followed the new rules, all of Moscow awaited the event, and what took place was recorded with cameras from four or five angles. The film was then shown several times on TV. It looked like this. Suleiman, holding a cell phone in one hand, approached his car. Three black figures appeared out of nowhere behind his back. Suleiman turned around and at that very moment gelatin-filled balls began to drum on his green velvet jacket.

It became immediately clear that the guys had blown it—all the guns were shooting green paint without leaving any visible traces on the velvet of the same color. Suleiman looked at his jacket, then at his killers and, gesticulating, began to explain something to them. He was answered with a new hailstorm of green paint. Suleiman turned away, bent over

the door, and tried to open it (he was getting a hangover, and he was a bit nervous, and so he couldn't get the key into the hole). The delay led to his ruin. The phone he had been holding suddenly rang. Shielding his face with his free hand, he brought it up to his ear, listened for a few seconds, was about to argue, but then apparently heard something very convincing. Nodding unwillingly, he selected a clean spot and fell to the sidewalk. This was just the right time to do this—the attackers were coming to the end of their supply of balls.

A control shot followed which made Suleiman look like Ronald McDonald with a green mouth. Throwing their weapons on the sidewalk next to the conditional corpse, the gunmen took off in a hurry. To leave the paintball guns at the place of execution subsequently became chic in its way and was considered very stylish, but it wasn't always done—the equipment cost a bundle of money.

People in the know said that some especially powerful people had called Suleiman from Grozny,[14] where the execution procedure was being watched live by satellite (naturally, the Chechen group took part in the convention; without it, any agreement would have lost its significance). The incompetence of the Moscow mafia sent the Chechen TV viewers into shock. Nothing of this kind had ever been shown on Grozny TV. "How can there be talk of a joint destiny with such a people?" the Chechen newspapers asked the next day.

Suleiman was loaded into an ambulance that had driven up, and a day later he was already nibbling sunflower seeds on the Azure Coast. After this first try, which had almost turned out to be a flop, the rules for a paintball shooting were quickly worked out and became a part of the corporate criminal code of honor. The weapons began to be loaded with paintballs in a red-blue-green sequence so that the result was guaranteed whatever the color of the clothing. A small camera was mounted on one of the barrels (because of the close range, there were usually several killers) so that the whole shooting process could be documented. Not all agreed right away to consider themselves dead. No one, of course, dared speak out against the criminal bosses who had approved the new ritual, but many maintained that, had these been real bullets, they would have been only wounded and within a week or two would have recovered and "brought down the bastards" themselves. Therefore, there arose the absolute necessity of third-party judges and, naturally, the role fell to the chief criminal bosses.

Examining the jackets and coats, at times brought from thousands of kilometers away for checking, they would decide who had been knocked off, and who could still live and be able to return to the capital scene after a period of time. They approached this work responsibly: they consulted with a whole synod of surgeons and, as a rule, didn't stretch the truth because they knew that for any uproar they would have to answer with the viscose, flannel, or silk on their own chests.

But nevertheless the criminal bosses were not always believed. With an obtuse insistence the Moscow brotherhood tried many times to invite Chuck Norris as a chief expert—someone who was a big specialist in beating people's brains out, or getting rid of his business neighbor. Norris respectfully declined, claiming that he was very busy with a process which in his faxes showed up as "shooting." And although in English it simply meant "shooting a film," the brothers-in-crime, more familiar with the first meaning of the term, nodded their small heads with respect. Evidently in their minds reality didn't fully divide into the cinematic and everyday kind. No one knows if Norris was truly that busy or, from an American way of looking at things, he simply didn't want to count the spots on Kenzo and Cardin jackets permeated with "bull's"[15] sweat, although this would have promised his Moscow business[16] stunning prospects at that.

Noticeable progress in the cultural paradigm was taking place parallel to all this. Shufutinsky[17] finally found himself on the spiritual rubbish heap—even the hastily prepared pop tune "Colors from Small Spasskaya" didn't help. In Moscow and Petersburg the nostalgic hit "Painter Man"[18] by the "Boney-M" group and a song about an artist who paints rain became all the rage—the latter affected the imagination with its significance and dreadful ambiguity. Aesthetes, just as ten years ago, preferred "Red Is a Mean, Mean Color"[19] by Steve Harley and "Ruby Tuesday" in the Marianne Faithfull rendition.

"The path Russia has taken these past few years," a critic of one of the Moscow papers wrote with satisfaction, "can be judged if only by the fact that now no one will start searching (and find! And people did find, you know!) for political allusions in these songs." In general, in any bar any mention of coloring substances in combination with a simple melody produced streams of tears of repentance and generous tips to the musicians, which pop culture parasitized in the most vulgar way.

The new fashion led at times to unpleasant consequences. Mick Jagger

almost lost his eye at a concert in "Russia Hall" when, performing "Paint It Black,"[20] he happened to put the sounding board of his guitar to his shoulder like the butt of a firearm. To the excited roar of the audience, kilos of gold chains were taken off and thrown onto the stage, one of which scratched his cheek.

Things couldn't go on, of course, without some monstrous misunderstandings. In an editorial, the erotic weekly *MK-Sutra*[21] described something called "a popular variety of virtual-colophonic exhibitransvestism" under the name "Painted Balls." This almost caused a scandal with the patriarchate, where they were reading the *MK-Sutra* in order to know what the life of contemporary young people was based on. At the last minute they managed to convince the hierarchs that entirely different colored balls were meant and nothing was threatening the country's spiritual flowering.

But it must nevertheless be acknowledged that the high point of influence on the cultural life of the two capitals was the opening of several offices for psychoanalysis where the spots left by the paint were interpreted as Rorschach inkblots,[22] based on which the conditionally surviving victims received a scientifically grounded explanation of the subconscious motives of the murderer and even of the person who had ordered the action. However, the offices existed for a short time only. The private power structure of "Chain Mail" (later "Palette"), the same one that had the brilliant advertising slogan, "We'll dispose of your problems with a flick of the finger," saw a competitor in them.

The eight leaders who at one point had gotten together in "The Russian Idea" for concluding the convention were becoming victims themselves, one after the other, of the smoldering reworking of the peace. In that sense their fate was no different from the fate of the other criminal bosses.

Slavik Aurora was forced to leave for his chateau in the Pyrenees after an egg (seemingly Faberge) filled with compressed paint, which Kostia Varyag had given him for his birthday, broke in his hands. Soon after that, Chechen goons, avenging Suleiman, covered Kostia Varyag himself with bunches of zeroes with the sadism of the Middle Ages, and his whole first week in the Maldives was spent with a pumice stone rubbing off the zigzags of indelible red acrylic covering his whole body. And Kobzar's leaving the business was full of tragic symbolism.

The reason turned out to be his passion for literature, which we

already spoke of in the beginning of our story. Kobzar not only wrote poems, but he published them, and then attentively watched for the reaction which, to be honest, as a rule simply didn't exist. And suddenly an article, "Ifkobcroaked," written by a certain Bisinsky[23] who worked for the *Literary Bazaar*, descended on him.

Notwithstanding the fact that Bisinsky worked for a publication whose title placed such high expectations on him, he not only couldn't rise to the level of *Bazaar* but in general didn't know how to choose his words carefully for this bazaar. He understood nothing about poetry and was a specialist basically in Moldavian port wine and Russian gestalt. Moreover, he didn't even have any notion as to who Yakov Kabarzin was; the poems published in the almanac "Day of Poetry" were the first that had turned up in his hand trembling from a hangover.

There's some sad irony in all this. Had Bisinsky written a good review of Kobzar's poems, he would have perhaps become a frequent customer in "The Russian Idea" and would've gotten some idea of the real nature of Russian gestalt, not the one sucked out of Spengler[24] whom he never did understand. But he dashed off one of his usual stinking, hack denunciations to a non-existent channel of authority, as a result of which, people said, food products wrapped in *Bazaar* spoiled twice as quickly as usual. Kobzar was particularly incited by the following turn of speech: "if that ass and homo feels offended by my grumbling article . . ."

"Who's an ass? Who's a homo?" Kobzar got boiling mad, grabbed the phone, and scheduled a meeting—naturally not with Bisinsky, but with the owner of the bank who had received all publications from "I" to "U" according to an interbank agreement about the division of newspapers. It was so unclear where to look for Bisinsky and what to grab him for that he seemed elusive and invisible.

"You have a certain columnist," he said to the pale banker at the meeting, who isn't a columnist but an insolent hack. And he's become so insolent that someone will pay for it."

It became clear that the banker simply didn't know about the existence of the *Literary Bazaar*, but was ready to hand over the whole editorial staff to appease Kobzar.

"I hadn't wanted to take the letter L," he complained. "It was Borka who dumped and forced the letters up to 'M' on me. And there's no arguing with him, is there? If you want to know, I can't stand the word *literatura* (literature; trans.) at all. It's such a natural monopoly. If done

with one's head, it should be written with a 'd' in it, then privatized and broken into two new ones—*litera* (letter, as in an alphabet; trans.) and *dura* (female fool; trans.). No, I won't give them any money, don't be afraid. Think about it yourself—they have a photo rubric, "Dialogues, dialogues." In each issue, thirty years in a row. All kinds of Mezhduliazhkises, Lupoyanovs of some kind . . . Who they are, no one knows. And all the time—dialogues, dialogues . . . The question is—what did they write their bullshit about for so many years? And they're still writing their fucking bullshit—dialogues, dialogues . . ."

Kobzar listened gloomily, holding his hands in the pockets of his heavy coat and frowning at the banker's generous stream of foul language. It finally began to dawn on him that the unfortunate columnist could hardly have been able to insult him personally, because he wasn't acquainted with him and had only dealt with his poems—so that the "ass" and "homo" were apparently aimed at those minor working demons of which there are many, according to Blok,[25] at the disposal of every artist.

"Well, all right," Kobzar growled unexpectedly to the banker trying to justify himself, "let the demons figure it out then."

The banker was taken aback, but Kobzar turned and, accompanied by his retinue, went to his gold Royce. No orders with respect to the columnist were given, but the cautious banker saw to it personally that the columnist was given a good beating and sacked. He was afraid to kill him because he couldn't predict how Kobzar's mood would be affected.

Two years passed. One morning Kobzar's car stopped on Nikolskaya Street by an establishment bearing the name "Salon-Image-Maker Lada-Benz," where his young girlfriend worked. Kobzar stepped from the car onto the sidewalk and suddenly a small, ragged homeless man rushed up to him with a bicycle pump in his hands. Before anyone could understand anything, he pressed the plunger and Kobzar was spattered from head to toe with a thick solution of yellow gouache. The homeless man turned out to be that same columnist, who decided to take vengeance for his lost career.

Kobzar swayed nobly, wiped the paint off his face (its color reminded him of the glass of egg liqueur which had started all this), and looked at the building of the Slaviansky Bazaar.[26] For the first time he sensed just how much this rumbling nothing into which he strode every morning with his voracious horde of Komsomol members, thieves, shooters, and economists wearied him. And here a miracle took place—a huge sports

hall, white with gold, unlike any on earth, with gold rings hanging from the ceiling, suddenly opened in his mind's eye for a second—and there, in the emptiness between the rings, was some kind of invisible presence in comparison with which the Slaviansky Bazaar and others not quite of that caliber had no value, no goal, and no point. And although his guards, kicking the weak-willed body of the columnist, were shouting "Doesn't count!" and "It's no good!", he closed his eyes and collapsed energetically, with enjoyment, to the ground.

All of Moscow came to Kobzar's funeral. For days and nights his open coffin stood on the stage of the Hall of Columns[27] overflowing with flowers. Only once, during a break, did he crawl out of it for a few minutes to have something to eat and drink a glass of tea. The people in the hall stood and applauded and, barely noticeably, Kobzar smiled from his coffin in response, recalling what he had lived through on Nikolskaya Street. Then people with whom he used to have dealings filed past; stopping, they would say a few simple words and move on. According to the conditions of the convention, Kobzar couldn't respond, but sometimes he would nevertheless close his eyes for a second, and the companion-in-arms walking past realized that he had been understood and heard. Several times Kobzar's eyes would become moist and shine from particularly warm words, and all TV cameras would turn toward his coffin. And when the mayor, who that evening had put on a simple shirt with large blue-red-green polka dots, recited from memory one of the best poems of the deceased to the gathering, for the first time in many years a teardrop quickly ran down Kobzar's cheek. He and the mayor exchanged a faint smile which the others didn't see, and Kobzar understood that the mayor had undoubtedly also seen the Gymnast. And tears no longer stopped but poured down his cheeks right onto the white brocade.

In a word, this was a solemn occasion which was imprinted on everyone's memory. The only thing that clouded it was the news that the columnist Bisinsky had been drowned in a barrel of brown nitro paint by unknown people. Kobzar didn't want this and was sincerely upset.

The morning of the next day found him at Vnukovo airport. He was flying without luggage through Ukraine. After stopping at the entrance for the last time, he looked over the cars, the pigeons, the taxi drivers and the trash that was called police, and strode into the airport building. At the end of the general hall a short young man bumped him lightly,

who had an anchor with a snake entwined around it and the word "acid" tattooed on his hand. He was holding a large black bag in which some kind of heavy metal clanked when they collided. Instead of excusing himself, the young man raised his eyes at Kobzar and asked (mixing Russian and Ukrainian; trs.), "Tough guy, eh?"

In Kobzar's pocket there now was a real Glock-27 with hollow point bullets which could send (and more precisely, immediately lay flat) the brazen fellow to a rather distant place—somewhere to the opposite wall of the hall. But in recent days something had changed in Kobzar's soul. He looked the young man up and down, smiled and sighed.

"Tough guy?" Kobzar repeated the question. "Sort of."

And he pushed the transparent door with the "Business Class" sign.

What went on in Moscow for the rest of the summer, fall, and the first half of winter was best expressed by the title of one article about the jubilee of the artist Saryan[28]—"an orgy of colors." By the end of December this orgy began to die down and gradually the outline of a truce to come took shape. The rules of paint-ball, established in Kobzar's time, were adhered to with reverence, and many outstanding figures had to leave Russian life for quiet island paradises, far from the wet and dreary Moscow boulevards, high above which twirl green funnels of financial tornadoes visible only to the third eye of a banker.

The final meeting for dividing everything and anything anew was earmarked for the same restaurant, "The Russian Idea," where at one time the historic meeting of the great eight took place with Kobzar at the head.

The meeting coincided with the New Year and music was thundering in the restaurant. Rolls of streamers flew above the heads of the gathering, confetti poured from the ceiling, and one had to speak loudly in order to outshout the orchestra. But the meeting, in essence, was purely a formality, and all five of the chief criminal bosses felt calm. Only one man aspired to the role of the ideological Soskovets of the criminal world—the mighty, law-abiding Pasha Mercedes, who was called that, naturally, not because of his car—he rode only in a made-for-order Ferrari. According to his passport, his full name was Pavel Garsiyevich Mercedes; he was the son of a pregnant communist woman who ran away from Franco,[29] received his first name at birth in honor of Korchagin,[30] and grew up in an orphanage in Odessa, as a result of which he brought to mind Babel's [31] heroes in his habits.

"Kobzar is no longer among us," he said to the gathering, casting a sidelong glance at Father Frost,[32] who was walking through the hall and offering gifts from a large, red sack to the people sitting at the tables.

"But I promise you that the bastard who ordered it will drown in a sea of paint. You know I can do that."

"Yes, Pasha, you can do a lot of things," people at the table responded deferentially.

"You know," Pasha continued, glancing at the gathering coldly, "Kobzar had a gold Royce which no one else had. So I say to you that I don't feel envious. Have you heard of the space station 'Mir'? Well, it's hanging in the sky only because I give that black hole half of everything I get from the Moskvoretsky market."

"Yes, Pasha. We have yachts and helicopters, some even have planes, but no one has such a showy thing like yours," said Lyonia of Arabia, expressing the general opinion, who had big dealings with Saddam himself and was just passing through Moscow.

"And for the dough that comes to me from Kotelnicheskaya Embankment," Pasha continued, "I support three thick journals which Zhora Soros[33] abandoned when he realized that it wasn't him that was important to them, but a couple of local Dostoevskys. I don't have a single kopeck from this, but on the other hand we're becoming many times over more influential because of these lads."

"Right on!" the Sukhumi criminal boss Babuin agreed.

"But that's not all. Everybody knows that when one half-wit from the Ministry of Defense got in the habit of calling himself part of my clique in the newspapers, Aslan and I saw to it that that half-wit was removed from his position. And this wasn't easy, because papa Boria, for whom he answered at the rendezvous, liked him . . ."

"We respect you, Pasha . . . You'll have no argument from us," swept over the table.

"And therefore I say to you—I will now take Kobzar's place. And if anyone wants to say he disagrees, let him say it right now."

Grabbing two small atomizers with red and blue dye from his jacket, Pasha squeezed them menacingly in his hands, wet with perspiration from nervousness, and fixed his eyes on the faces of his partners.

"Does anyone have anything to say against?" he repeated his question.

"No one has anything against," Babuin said. "Why have you taken out that crap? Put it away and don't frighten us. We're not children."

"So no one wants to say anything?" Pasha Mercedes repeated his question, lowering his paint containers.

"I want to say something," a voice resounded unexpectedly behind his back. All turned their heads.

At the table stood Father Frost in a hat tilted to the side. He had already ripped off the beard he no longer needed, and everybody noticed that he was very young, excited, and, it seemed, not totally sure of himself, but in his hands was an old PPSh[34] which he had taken out of the sack, one that had clearly lain the last half century in some dugout in the middle of the Bryansk[35] swamp. On one of his hands there was a strange tattoo—an anchor, with a snake entwined around it, under which the word "acid" was visible in blue. But the most important thing, of course, were his eyes.

The thought-form twinkling in them could be expressed most precisely with visual-linguistic means as follows:

GIVE BACK THE MONEY

And in his eyes there was still such a mad desire to make his way into the world—where life was easy and without cares, where the sea and sky were blue, the air clear, the sand clean and hot, the cars reliable and quick, the conscience obedient, and the women compliant and beautiful—that those gathered around the table almost believed it themselves that such a world truly existed somewhere. But this continued for only a second.

"I want to say something," he repeated shyly, raised the barrel of his machine gun and released the breech lock.

And here we will leave our heroes, reader. I think that now is just the right time to do so, because their situation is serious, their problems deep, and I don't really have a clear idea as to who they are in order for our imaginations to follow these dark bogeymen to their last maneuver. Do you want to follow them, reader? I don't. As far as I'm concerned, it's like in war—there's no air and they shoot real bullets.

So to hell with them.

Let us drink, have a good time—Happy New Year, friends! Happy New Year, which I'm absolutely sure, will be bright, happy and lucky and—what we especially wish all the shooters—unusually colorful.

1997

NOTES

1. *bayan*: a type of accordion.
2. B.G.—Boris Grebenshchikov (1959-), a popular rock musician and songwriter, the lead singer of the band Aquarium. The epigraph cites his song to "tractor drivers."
3. TransSib (Trans Siberian Railroad) and Magnitka (Magnitogorsk Iron and Metal Works): There were various organized crime contenders for control of these two giants in the 1990s.
4. Kobzar: *Kobzar* is the name of the first book of poetry of the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, published in 1840. The name Kobzar also brings to mind Iosef Kobzon, the Russian "Frank Sinatra," who is widely reputed to have ties with organized crime.
5. Soskovets, Oleg N.: First Deputy Chairman of the Russian Federation, 1993-1996. In 1991, Minister of Metallurgy of the USSR.
6. Nekrasov, Nikolai (1821-78): Russian critic, poet, editor and publisher. His civic-minded verses and satirical stories appealed to the radical and reform-minded intelligentsia.
7. Denis Davydov (1784-1839): a Russian soldier-poet of the Napoleonic Wars who gained fame as an indefatigable fighter.
8. Bunin, Ivan (1870-1953): a major prose writer who emigrated to Paris after the Bolshevik revolution. Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1933. He was rediscovered by the reading Russian public in the 1960s, and again in the 1990s.
9. A song performed by Evgeny Kemerovsky on his 1995 album *Moi brat* (My Brother), which became a big hit, especially after a video became available. A stanza that is repeated three times (in prose translation): "Gang members don't shoot each other, You've nothing to divide in life. Forget your grudges, sit at a round table, Because it's hard for everyone to bury his friends."
10. Varyag: His name brings to mind the Varyags or Varangians, who were Vikings, Norsemen. Among the Slavs, by the 9th-10th centuries they had a reputation as pirates, skilled tradesmen and soldiers. The Varangians established the great trade route from Kiev to Byzantium, often referred to in history books as "the trade route from the Varangians to the Greeks."
11. Riurik: according to legend, a Viking prince who was invited to come and rule over quarreling east Slav and Finn tribes in approximately 860 A.D.
12. Sobchak, Anatoly: Chairman or Mayor of the Leningrad City Soviet in 1990; he organized opposition to the coup of 1991 and played the same crucial role as Boris Yeltsin did in Moscow. There is some question as to what extent he tried to wage a struggle with the growing crime rate in St. Petersburg.
13. One version of this anecdote: A "New Russian" found out that it was a great thing to be religious in the 1990s. He decided to buy a cross for his new office,

the biggest he could find. He went to a church and began selecting a cross, but all of them were too small for him. Finally he bought a cross that was about two meters long. "Fine, I'll take it, wrap it up," he said, "but take off the gymnast."

14. Grozny: the capital of Chechnya, a republic in Northern Caucasus. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Chechnya declared its independence from Russia. This has led to years of fighting and political maneuvering, since Moscow has not been willing to relinquish its control of this area.
15. "bull": someone who is in the lowest caste of the mafia hierarchy. He is the one sent to "teach someone a lesson" by beating him or breaking some bones. Equivalent to "soldier" in the American mafia.
16. A casino in Moscow in the 1990s bore the Chuck Norris name.
17. Shufutinsky, Mikhail (1948 -): a performer of ballads, cabaret and prison songs.
18. "Painter Man": "Painter man, painter man, / Who wanna be a painter man?" is the catchy refrain.
19. The chorus to this song: "He's just a body, a beat-up body / He gets his kicks on a fatal crash / And he carries a sign that screams / "Red is a mean, mean color!"
20. "Paint It Black": One of the best songs of the Rolling Stones, it begins, "I see a red door and I want it painted black."
21. *MK-Sutra*: *MK* can be read as a reference to *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, a newspaper founded in 1919, whose popularity in the 1990s grew in part because of its entertaining and sensational stories. The *Sutra* brings to mind the *Kama Sutra*, an ancient India text from the 4th century A.D., which is widely considered as the standard work on love in Sanskrit literature. Pelevin is making fun of *MK-Sutra*, a pulp tabloid which caters to low tastes.
22. The Rorschach inkblot test: a method of psychological evaluation created by Hermann Rorschach in 1921; it was further developed by other researchers and is still used today.
23. Bisinsky is a caricature of the critic Pavel Basinsky, Pelevin's longtime enemy. *Literary Bazaar* is a parodic reference to the *Literary Gazette*, which in the 1990s began to lose its importance as the main organ of the intelligentsia, a position the periodical enjoyed in the 1970s and 1980s and during perestroika.
24. Spengler, Oswald (1880-1936): German historian and philosopher. His major work, *The Decline of the West*, brought him world fame.
25. Blok, Aleksandr (1880-1921): the principal representative of Russian Symbolism, whose poetry is imbued with mystical elements.
26. Slaviansky (Slavic) Bazaar: a famous, expensive restaurant in Moscow in the 1990s.
27. The Hall of Columns in Moscow's House of Unions is where many political leaders have lain in state before their funerals.
28. Saryan, Martiros (1880-1972): an Armenian artist whose paintings are famous for their brilliant, joyous colors.

29. Franco, Francisco (1892-1975): the military leader whose name is most closely associated with the army's victory in the Spanish civil war. Appointed generalissimo of nationalist Spain in 1936 and head of state of all of Spain from 1939 until his death in 1975.
30. Korchagin, Pavel: the hero of Nikolai Ostrovsky's autobiographical novel, *How the Steel Was Tempered,* serialized in 1932-1934. The novel was printed in millions of copies and Korchagin was touted as the model of utterly selfless devotion to the Communist Party.
31. Babel, Isaac (1894-1940): a short story writer whose works include a cycle of stories about Benya Krik, a flamboyant Jewish gangster in Odessa in the 1920s.
32. *Ded Moroz*, which translates as Grandfather Frost, but is usually referred to as Father Frost by English speakers, brings presents to children on New Year's Eve.
33. Soros, George (1930-): born in Hungary; a global financier and philanthropist whose foundations support the development of democratic societies.
34. Pelevin must be referring to the PPSh41 produced after the German invasion of 1941 in response to the urgent need for a light and simple weapon capable of a high volume of fire.
35. Bryansk: a city and oblast southwest of Moscow in western Russia.