

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

SEBASTIJAN PREGELJ
THE MAN WHO RODE A
TIGER

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Sebastijan Pregelj: The Man Who Rode a Tiger

excerpt from the novel

On a clear night when I can see thousands upon thousands of stars in the sky I ask myself
where amongst these celestial bodies is Artiom Khachikyan

I sit in a comfortable padded chair with my legs folded against my chest and hands supporting my head. I look at space through the oval porthole. Thousands of stars shimmer as if someone was sending a message in Morse code from the other side of infinity. I do not know how long I have been staring into the heavens. I cannot even remember whether at the start I tried to figure out the message or whether I was convinced from the very beginning that it was not intended for me. But I have plenty of time. Plenty of time to sit here, to watch the stars and to think about figuring out the message.

If I lean forward a little I can see the blue planet far below. Earth. That is where I came from. Now I am three hundred and eighty five thousand metres above the planet on the ISS Zarya.

I arrived at the orbital station two years, one month and four days ago. For mission control the flight was routine. No one was particularly excited, no one felt particularly nervous. That kept me calm. For me it was the first time. The mission represents the peak of my career. I received a new uniform and promotion to a higher rank is sure to follow my return. At the time both these things seemed paramount, so the decision to take up the offer was an easy one. Were I not to be sent into space, I would have finished my military career at forty one as a Vice-Marshal in the Air Force. Perhaps I would have achieved a transfer, but not to anywhere near the bases where new aircraft are tested. I am considered far too old for such work. There would certainly be no further promotion.

I am now forty three. I have another seven months, fifteen days and eleven hours to my forty-fourth birthday. It seems more and more likely that – like my last two birthdays – I will spend it alone, four hundred kilometres above the planet I come from. I shall spend my birthday far from anyone with whom I could raise a glass. Even any one of the many people I used to avoid, those to whom I had nothing to talk about, or who got on my nerves, or who I suspected were members of the security and intelligence service or their informants, would now be welcome company. Down on Earth I spent most of my time alone. At work I was just sociable enough to avoid provoking people to conceiving anything about me that could damage my reputation. When it comes to promotion the most trivial of things can be detrimental. Even a smile at the wrong moment is crucial.

Sixteen years after the borders were opened and after the danger of a new world war and a nuclear conflict had more or less diminished, years after our once mighty country split up into countless states whose peoples and new leaders cannot agree whether things were better before or are better now, in a time where we too have a multi-party political system, capitalism, unemployment and organised crime, I also have an idea of what it is like on the other side. People on the other side also have to be careful who they smile at, what they read, write and talk about. They also have trackers on their heels, their walls have ears and there are eyes everywhere, surveying and recording. Despite this we remain quite different. Our greatest similarity is that people on both sides insist that things used to be much better.

Up here I have had the chance of awakening, but I would much prefer to be down there. I would gladly exchange this chance with the general dissatisfaction of the daily routine that at least makes people know they are alive. The only reason I know I am alive up here is that the medical equipment I plug myself into twice a day shows me so. Apart from this I am more dead than alive. Down below at least my inadequate pay, the daily price increases, the queues in the shops and the empty shelves would anger me enough to make me know I was alive. Down below I would know I was alive because members of the security services would keep adding to my file. As long as your file is being added to you are alive. When there is nothing else to add to it you are dead.

When I return to Earth one day – though I am afraid that that won't be any time soon – I will be able to talk to others about my experience. Perhaps I will even write a book. Perhaps a documentary will be made about it. But none of this will convey even a tenth of what I am truly going through. I know this from my own past reactions. When I would see images of natural disasters or terrorist attacks it all seemed far away and never gave me reason to be alarmed. I was always glad that this was not something I was experiencing at first hand. They were things happening to others in far away places. In discussions I would of course agree how horrible it all was, but in reality I never genuinely felt horrified. The same way people listening and watching me will never be able to fully comprehend what I was trying to tell them. Of course they will all agree with me that our Earth is unique, that it is our common home and that we are all responsible for it, but they will not genuinely feel this. What a shame.

My name is Artiom Khachikyan. I am forty three and am an Air Vice-Marshal in the Russian Air Force. Just like the files of anyone in the armed forces, my personal file is full, but not a single document in it states anything to the effect of me being undedicated, unreliable, indecisive or unprofessional. With the reasons for each promotion carefully explained, my progress is detailed in my file. Just as everything about me is noted in my file, details about my parents are also given. It starts with my father's name and surname and my mother's maiden name and continues with medical records and general information. It states that my father is Georgian and my mother Russian. It notes that my father was a miner who was given a job at the post office after he had an inflammation of the optic nerve and that my mother was a seamstress who was soon considered to be too good for the production line and was transferred to the department that looked after important state officials. It reports that neither had any hereditary diseases, that

they both had all their teeth, without any fillings, at the age of thirty, that their blood was healthy and that Mother had her only child at the age of twenty one. Complications at birth resulted in her not being able to have any further children. This did not sadden them particularly. We have one, Father would normally say. We have our son. And that is enough. Our name will be preserved, our line will continue.

Our family lived in a smallish village in the north eastern part of European Russia. I knew a few of the surrounding villages and a nearby market town. I had never even seen a large town from afar. Then, in the fifth form, my life changed overnight. My teacher sent me to a physics and maths competition. I got top marks and the gold prize at both. I was sent on to the national level and have never lived at home since. Teachers and officials rather than my parents chose which school would be most appropriate for me. When the decision was made it was final and its implementation immediate.

At boarding school I was allocated the top bunk and the metal locker next to the locker belonging to the boy who slept on the bed underneath mine. I was given a pair of shoes, a coat, a sweater, two pairs of trousers, two shirts, tracksuit bottoms and gym slippers, three pairs of underpants, three pairs of socks, one handkerchief and a sewing kit. I also got a toothbrush, toothpaste and a bar of soap. Last of all I was also given two towels. The boy who slept in the bottom bunk showed me how the clothes were to be tidied away in the locker. He explained that the towels should go on top and the soap, toothbrush and toothpaste should be placed on the top towel. Always. Particularly at locker inspection time. The locker inspection took place on Wednesdays and Sundays. Nothing else was allowed in the lockers. Food was strictly forbidden. For hygiene reasons. Books and notebooks would be given in class. Anything else needed for writing and drawing would also be given in class. The boy's name was Petru Miron and he was from Moldova.

When I was moved to boarding school I didn't see my parents. I wrote to them once with the teacher dictating the letter, but never received a reply. I was only allowed home for the summer holidays. My parents seemed satisfied. They knew that the path others had chosen for me was the best for me. They had no doubt about that. Of course they missed me, but they never spoke of this in front of me. They would tell me how lucky I was and how I would only understand this when I grew up. And when I would understand I would be grateful to them. And grateful to the headmaster and everyone else who made it possible for me to attend such a distinguished school. The Motherland is great. Serve her to the best of your abilities!, Father said blowing onto his medal and polishing it with his handkerchief that he then put back in his trouser pocket. He attached the medal to the grey jacket he would wear on Sundays, holidays and formal occasions. He had received it as a young miner and was extremely proud of it. This medal is also the only thing of my father's that I still have. It all happened a long time ago.

I would go home for two months every summer and for a week in the winter holidays. Mother was happy and Father was proud. Father would still be polishing his medal and there would always be something for Mother to hem or sew, as if she didn't do enough hemming and sewing

at work. On Sunday afternoons we would stroll along the promenade, as we called the dusty road that lead through the village at the end of which was a monument to the Unknown Soldier. Mother would wear her floral dress that she kept for only the most important events in that period of her life and shoes with a slight heel. Father would wear his grey upturned trousers, his jacket with the medal and his postman's hat that he only wore at work on days when he had important official duties to carry out. I wore the suit I was sent home in. Before we left home Mother would comb my hair. Families and couples, rarely single people, would walk along the road. All the older men displayed their medals on their chests. Only soldiers in their formal attire looked more distinguished than these men with their medals. But there were never many of these in our village. Only occasionally did somebody's son on leave from his military service come back to the village. There was no one from our area at the Military Academy.

Father would often ask me whether I would wear such a uniform one day. Since I didn't know, I would just shrug my shoulders. Then he would start talking instead of me: My son, you will wear such a uniform for sure. Just wait a few years. Tigran and Zinaida's son wears one! And a few years later a row of decorations will appear on the uniform, eventually even two rows. Of course they will. My son, I am so proud of you even now! Father would put his strong right arm around me and pull me close to him. I would feel embarrassed and always had the feeling that everyone was watching and wondering whether I was not a little too old for my father to keep hugging me like this.

Now I would be happy to return to those times, if only for an hour or two. I would be happy for my father to hug me with his miner's arms and tell me how proud he was of me. For him to see that I really do wear a uniform. With his good eye he would see that my uniform is not just an ordinary one, but an Air Force uniform with insignia indicating I am a cosmonaut. While it's true that today we are not the heroes that the first people to fly into space were, I am sure Father would be as proud as if his son was none other as Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin or at least Gherman Stepanovich Titov. Mother would also be proud and would discreetly wipe her tears, though she would not say anything. Mother never knew how to say what she felt.

She was the same at Father's funeral. Father died unexpectedly a few days before the end of the summer holidays. I had been thinking that I would remember that summer as the last of primary school and as the summer I first started to regularly listen to news on the radio, like adults do. Unlike adults, who listen to the news on the radio regardless of events, I started listening to them because that was the year that daily reports about Valery Victorovich Ryumin and Leonid Ivanovich Popov's six month mission in space were being given on the radio. Father kept repeating what a great turning point this was. From here on things were serious, he would pat me on my shoulder and would explain to anyone prepared to listen how his son was to enrol in military school. It was a matter of weeks before he too would be wearing a uniform!

I had wanted to organise my summer holiday myself so I could spend as much time as possible with friends and ex-school mates, though I wasn't doing very well. Father kept calling me and making me join him. Now we're off to see *so-and-so* to tell him all about school, he would order.

So-and-so was usually some old man, most often a Red Army veteran who needed little more encouragement than a shot or two of vodka to start talking about what it was like during the war, all day long well into the night; how they fought from east to west, how they first liberated the Motherland and then half of Europe, how they could easily have reached the Atlantic had the Americans not gotten in their way – even then they were afraid of us; they knew they should stop us, but they stopped us with a ruse. They called it a peace conference.

The day Father died was not much different to any other day. Before lunch I listened to all the hourly news bulletins that without exception started with the heroic successes of our army in Afghanistan and then went on to praise the unsurpassability of our cosmonauts. I always hoped that the next bulletin would give a little more detail, but the item read out by a female voice was exactly the same all morning, so by lunch time I knew it off by heart. At lunch Father announced that we would visit a certain Leonid Mikhailovich that afternoon, a man who had served with none other than Arseniy Vasilievich Vorozheikin, the flying ace and hero of the Soviet Union. As usual, after lunch Father sat on the bench in front of the house and lit a cigarette. I helped Mother in the kitchen. We had nearly finished clearing up when Mother asked me whether or not we were not going to visit Leonid Mikhailovich. So I went outside to see what Father was doing. To my great surprise he was lying on the bench. His postman's hat and cigarette were lying in the ground. I approached him and shook him to wake him up, but he didn't move. He still didn't move when I shook him harder. Suddenly I felt flustered. I called Mother.

We buried him two days later. More or less the entire village gathered at the cemetery. Leonid Mikhailovich also came. He came and shook Mother's hand after the funeral and then greeted me. He said I should join the airmen. An airman can go on to become a cosmonaut, and a cosmonaut is the most advanced achievement of man to date. From above, the world looks quite different. Remember that, he said, smoothing his grey moustache as he turned around to leave.

Mother invited a few relatives and neighbours round for lunch. They all talked about Father to start with, what a successful miner he was and what a pity that his eye problem cut his career short. They all agreed that, had he carried on working at the mine, he would surely have received more medals. Then they talked about his work at the post office. They all agreed that Tigran was one of the most reliable if not the most reliable postman in the country. Then they moved on to me. They commented that I was a son one could only wish for. Just look at him!, they pulled me about patting my shoulders and stroking my hair. So there is no need for sadness. None at all, Mother agreed, wiping her tears discreetly. I felt embarrassed. I wished I could just disappear.

The following morning Mother started wearing black and after a few days she returned to work. I got up as soon as she closed the door behind her. I got dressed quickly and stepped outside, slipped along the length of the house to the corner of the outbuilding, as Father would call the far end of the house. The first part was a small barn where we kept a few chickens, a goose and a pig. There was a second door on the other side of the building which we would open every morning to allow the animals out into a fenced-off paddock where grass had long stopped growing and into which we would throw them food. Every evening we put them back inside the

barn. This was to prevent any weasels or foxes sneaking in and attacking the chickens or the goose. Further along from the barn was a narrow granary that led into a tool-shed. There was a small door in the corner of the tool-shed that opened only from the outside. There was no way of opening it from the inside. The door was so low that despite being quite small for my age I had to bend right down and more or less crawl when I wanted to go through it.

Father had long forbidden me going in there. He would try to scare me by saying the door might close and I wouldn't be able to get out, or that Old Kyrill would hurt me and run away. But despite his strange appearance and odd smell I was not afraid of Old Kyrill who lived in this minute room at the far end of the outbuilding. In fact, Old Kyrill and I got on quite well.

I cannot remember exactly what Mother and Father told me about the old man. I cannot even remember where he came from or why exactly he lived in our outbuilding. I cannot remember whether they ever explained why he didn't live in the house with us or why we were not supposed to mention him to anyone else. Now I am convinced that everyone knew of his existence just as they knew who he was and why he lived in the far end of the outbuilding that had no proper door or window. At home this was never explained.

Only years later, quite some time after Mother died, did I find out that the old man with the translucent skin who kept smoothing his beard, sipping tea and kissing an icon of Saint Anastasia was in fact my grandfather. That was also when I found out that Mother and Father did not keep him locked away in the closet to cause him harm, but quite the opposite, they wanted to protect him. In today's terms Old Kyrill's story is a complicated one and very hard to understand. But only a few decades ago there were thousands of similar stories and no one thought they were complicated or incomprehensible. But people kept quiet about them. So persistently quiet that to a large extent these stories are now forgotten.

To put it simply, Old Kyrill was locked in the closet after he found himself in a strange and inexplicable predicament just before the end of the war. No one knew what really happened, but it was obviously nothing good. A body was found in the forest above the village and Kyrill Khachikyan had run away. Innocent people do not run away, do they? Anyhow, Kyrill was on the run for years, hiding in the Siberian taiga where things were no better than if he had handed himself in to the authorities. In the years he was a fugitive, many things changed. He would not, as he believed, have been killed. Our family would also not have been blamed. Most probably, he would have been tried and sent to one of the camps everyone knew about but no one dared mention. The old man would have been sent there and then pardoned and set free a few years later. But Old Kyrill did not know this and his fear of revenge was too great, so he hid in the taiga and only returned home having grown old, tired and ill from all the running and hiding. When a decision had to be made about what to do with him, he was hidden in the closet at the far end of the outbuilding. For years the old man was considered missing, so father was able to get an official certificate from the authorities declaring he was considered dead. With this certificate in hand, Father asked the stonemason to add the old man to the list of names on the family gravestone.

On the morning when Mother wore her black blouse and skirt before returning to work a few days later, I slipped outside and hurried down to the second door of the outbuilding and stepped into the tool shed. I moved some of the tools standing against the wall and knelt down in the corner, knocked twice on the wooden door, slowly opened it and crawled through. As usual Old Kyrill was lying on a straw bed. When he saw me in the rays of light shining through the gaps in the planks of wood under the roof, he pushed himself up on his elbows and smiled: It's you! I nodded and dragged myself to a wooden beam covered with some straw where I would normally sit so as not to get my trousers dirty. I leaned against the vertical beam and told him that we had had a funeral the previous day. I know all about it, the old man sobbed, lifting up the icon from his chest and kissing it twice. I know all about it, my dear Artiom. But life goes on. You will go back to school. Your mother will find a way to deal with things. She is a brave and strong woman. Life goes on. The pain will go away. Wounds will heal. But, do tell me, are you looking forward to school again? Well, yes, I nodded, of course I am. But I am also a little afraid. But what of? Old Kyrill leaned forward. I don't know, I shrugged my shoulders. I am just afraid. Not very much. Just a little. If you are just a little afraid, the old man smiled, then that's alright. A little fear is always a good thing. It keeps you alert. Makes you think. And you are looking forward to school, he raised the icon to his lips again. That is how it should be. Knowledge opens golden doors, he said kissing the image of Saint Anastasia and then putting the icon down on his bed.

I sit in a comfortable red padded chair with my legs folded against my chest and hands supporting my head. I look at space through the oval porthole. Where amongst all these stars are Mother and Father? Where amongst all these stars is Old Kyrill? Are they all together? Are they watching me from the other side, unable to hide their admiration at how far I have come?

If I close my eyes I can just hear Father's voice telling Mother and the old man: I knew our boy would go far. Just look at him! Isn't he remarkable in all his cosmonaut gear?! Isn't he remarkable in that red seat, controlling the entire space station?! Mother does not reply. She wipes her tears into her lace handkerchief every so often. Whenever a tear manages to roll down her cheek without her catching it in her hanky, thousands of shining meteorites shoot across the sky, disappearing before the eye manages to fully perceive them. No one observing the stars through a telescope down there can be quite sure whether they really were meteorites or whether they just thought they were; no one can be sure they did not see the silver streaks shoot by merely because they needed to or wished to see them. Old Kyrill mutters something every so often. Nothing comprehensible. He also probably keeps kissing his icon of Saint Anastasia. He probably keeps kissing it and talking to it. Of course it might just be possible that he is not kissing the icon, but Saint Anastasia herself.

Old Kyrill is now with all the saints he pleaded with for this and that during his lifetime. And that is quite a chorus. There are far more saints than Old Kyrill's requests. In fact, Old Kyrill really did not ask for anything else but to survive and begged the saints to protect those close to his heart. Ever since I can remember he also prayed for peace, for mild weather and an abundant harvest; he prayed more for other people than he did for himself. It is true that he most often turned to Saint Anastasia for help, and that he trusted her and relied on her help most of all, but

he also addressed the occasional request to Saint Cyril, Saint Nicholas, Saint Anne and others. Now he is where they are, perhaps more saintly than any of them, but no one notices this. But let it be so. Old Kyrill would never have wanted people to paint icons of him, cover wooden panels in gold, kiss his image and address various requests to him. Particularly since he would never want to disappoint people. But that is just inevitable. Even one prepared to give everything cannot give to everyone.

I sit in the padded chair with my legs folded against my chest and hands supporting my head when I hear a noise on the speaker. A moment later I hear a voice asking whether a connection has been established. I jump up. I stretch out my hand and plug in the microphone. I reply that I can hear. Not particularly well, but I can hear you! Can you hear me? Can you hear me? I ask. No answer. The noise dies out. I gulp. Today is the three hundred and thirty-seventh day I am unable to establish communications with Earth. Those down there occasionally manage to get a link, but only for a few seconds. The day before we lost communication they informed me that I would not be picked up on the twenty-first of May as originally planned. They would also not come on the first of June, which was given as the reserve date. My stay on the space station would be extended. When exactly they were planning on coming they did not say. That is not within our jurisdiction, was their answer. The following day communications were down. Weeks went by before any noise at all came from the speakers. The noise served to remind me that the connection at least still existed, that I was not just switched off. But I am not sure what decisions were made down there: whether they had any intention to come and get me, or just leave me up here with an omniscient divine viewpoint and all human weakness.

At times I wonder whether the communications were deliberately cut. Maybe this is just another in a series of experiments, just that this time instead of a dog or a chimpanzee they are using a human being. They had probably prepared the experiment well in advance of my departure, though it is possible that it came as an afterthought. Maybe it is the only thing left that they can do. Maybe the damage on the station is just too great. Maybe they have run out of funds. They know they will never come to collect me, but they do not want to waste the opportunity. So we have one last experiment.

At times I try to imagine what the rest of my life might look like. I try to imagine what the next five or seven years will be like. That is how long the supplies on the space station would last. If of course all would not be ended in an instant with a serious fault or accident. I have decided that I will first change my daily routine. I will stop connecting myself to the medical equipment and recording data. I will halt the various scientific observations that are in any case of absolutely no use to me. Instead, I will dedicate my time to the diaries of my predecessors. To them I will add the notes that I discovered a short while ago. It seems someone before me sorted out the notes that his predecessors did not include in their diaries and were thus left on the space station. The earliest such notes were made when Vladimir Denisovich Sokolov was at the station.

It is crucial that I start reading as soon as possible. The isolation is getting to me. If I start reading too late, the notes will have a different meaning to today when I still know my name and rank

and when I am sure that I am up here all alone and having been unable to set up my life with anyone else back on Earth, without anyone waiting for me down there.

I am not successful with women. My rank and uniform do act as a magnet for women, but that has not helped me. Restaurants and bars in the vicinity of army barracks are still full of girls that are not as shy as their predecessors. The new generation is in looks and behaviour increasingly like women in the West. They speak directly and verbosely. They do not need caviar reserved for export, white Georgian wine and a number of meetings before they can decide who they like and who they don't. Things happen much quicker. But in such company I feel old. I could be their father. They could well be daughters of my mates at the Academy. Most of my mates are married. Most of them have children. Some have even passed away. Anyhow, I feel old in the company of young girls, though this only troubles me. They do not care how old I am and some even find me more attractive because of my streak of grey hair.

Occasionally I would sit in a corner of a pub or restaurant with some girl like this. After the third or fourth vodka I could not get a word in edgeways. Their stories are all similar in that wherever they are, they all want to get out at the earliest opportunity. We officers seem like a good solution. Another solution is the internet. Quite a few have gone off to America and there are some in Germany and France too. But when they arrive they never live as was were promised or like they imagined they would. They often end up living on large farms and ranches, far from any settlements and even further from any shopping centres. Lonely men who chose their wives from catalogues have no idea of where the countries these women come from are, and choose Russians and Ukrainians who have a reputation for being hard-working, beautiful and dependable. All the Jims, the Dietmars and the Émiliens marry these Bogdanas, Svetlanas and Katerinas because they need women who work like super productive Soviet workers, bear children like fertility goddesses and fuck like whores. They are not interested in the rest. And these are the stories with a happy ending. Then there are those with unhappy endings. Girls do not talk about those at all.

Lately, I often wonder whether the men in Baikonur are my brothers. Up until now, I convinced myself that they were not, as they could not possibly be. True, I never had a brother or a sister to know what that meant, but I imagined it was something like having a mother and father or Old Kyrill. Now I am no longer sure about this. I have no one else but the men at the cosmodrome. After Father's and then Old Kyrill's and Mother's deaths I was left all alone. And this was a long time ago. Old Kyrill died four years after Father and Mother died a month later. I was never sure whether it was of sadness, loneliness or whether she had some kind of illness. I do not want to think about this at all. I do not want to create any feeling of blame. I had nothing to do with their deaths but their deaths seem to demand an effect on me. But I don't want to think about death. What I am thinking about is whether the men at ground control are my brothers.

The men at Baikonur know where I spend my spare time; they know where I go on holiday and how I spend my time off. They know which films I enjoy and that I would have bought myself a

classical American four-wheel drive pick-up truck were I not far too rational to do anything like that. The men at Baikonur know I am not particularly successful with women. They know the names of girls I slept with more than once. They even know which one I slept with and never talked about. Times have obviously changed. Now women also talk about sex and rank us and exchange information about men as one would exchange notes at school. Otherwise this information would not become known. Even how many times I managed to come with each of them. I don't like talking about sex. When men start recounting the details, the exaggeration intensifies. The same goes for the exaggeration about the size of their cocks. They boast of lengths that I never noticed in the showers. That said, I do not really look at the men's members in the shower, but if any one of them had a cock that reached half way down his thighs I would have noticed it. Others would also have noticed it and would surely point it out and make a fuss about it in the showers. Safe to say, none of the men I work with and play basketball or volleyball with twice a week in our spare time possesses a cock that reaches half way down his thigh. When they talk about sex they all exaggerate. When they talk about sex they allow each other made up details that make the stories more interesting. The truth is quite dull. No one is interested in the truth. We do not want to share the truth. We want to listen to long stories. And there are no long stories without long cocks. So?

When the men in Baikonur are not talking about sex, they are talking about conflicts and war. That is when they show off their scars. Some have theirs on their arms or legs, others on their bellies or backs. Some have scars all over. Some have lost a finger or two, others a percentage of their eyesight or hearing or both. Some wet their bed; others wake up in the night in pools of sweat. Before they wake up they scream in their sleep. Some never scream in their sleep because they never sleep. They lie on their backs and stare at the ceiling. They keep looking at the alarm clock that they set every evening despite knowing that they never need it. They still set it as it makes them feel safe. They know that there are no alarm clocks in the loony bin. Some sleep with a pistol under their pillow, others wearing boots. Most have two locks on their front door and some even have a bolt on the inside. Some of them stick a hair on their door to know whether anyone has entered their flat in their absence. Many have covered their walls with crosses, icons and family photographs. Of all of them the most extreme was probably second lieutenant Misha Sakharov who years ago hesitated between enrolling in the Art or Military Academy. When he returned from Chechnya he covered the walls of his flat in frescoes. The walls in the hallway show landscapes: a tundra opposite the door and taiga on the wall next to it. The kitchen is covered with scenes from space. He converted the living room into a Garden of Eden, full of colourful flowers and unusual animals. When I visited his flat and stared at the creations in awe, he pointed out the heads of the animals amongst the flora. One of the peacocks has the head of his wife, the butterfly displays his daughter's face on its wings and he added his own face to the owl, silently observing all the things going on below from just below the ceiling. In the bathroom he painted a bright blue sky with white clouds on the ceiling and a waterfall that flows into the drain under the sink.

Despite all this we are lucky. We are finished with battles and wars. No one from Baikonur is sent to war. The only battles we fight now are those inside our heads. Occasionally accidents happen. Three years ago the pistol Stanislav Grigorievich kept under his pillow fired. It blew off the right half of his wife Orlenda's head. When he saw what had happened he shot himself. They left three children behind. Two boys and a girl. They were taken from the scene by the police and then given to the social worker to deal with. We never saw any of them again. Five years ago something similar happened to Andriy Osipovich. He grabbed the knife he kept under his bed and stabbed his wife Judita seven times in his sleep. He then turned round and slept till morning. When he woke up he went to the police station and told them what happened. There were no orphans left behind in this case. Andriy and Judita were only married for four years and had no children. Before the incident there was talk that they could not have children because Andriy had a case of lazy sperm. Later there was talk that Judita was five months pregnant. There was even talk that it was not an accident and that Andriy did not stab her in his sleep, but murdered her in cold blood after she fell asleep. He was quite aware of what he was doing at the time. He killed her because the child was not his. In the end it turned out the woman wasn't pregnant at all. A similar accident had happened to Igor Bogdanovich six years earlier. And so on and so on.

In any case we are quite a class of our own down there. The security intelligence service keeps a sharper eye on us than on other officers, but we all learnt to accept this a long time ago. There is no other way. It is like that in the United States too. Every country guards its space programme. As far as our own is concerned, it is public knowledge that in the next decade we plan to send a number of scientific missions to the Moon. And a little later to Mars. Details are not known, but we all know that the Americans are planning something similar. Who will be the first is hard to say. The best thing would be to merge the two space programmes. But I don't believe it will ever happen. Neither do members of the security intelligence service. I am sure they have been through my locker where I keep my ceremonial uniform and a few bits and bobs and dug out the notepad where I have jotted down the phone numbers and addresses of all the people I know or have contact with. The information from the notepad has long been entered into a computer and all the names and addresses checked. Just in case. But they did not find anything suspicious or anything they did not know about before. One of the people listed is Major Tom Johnson. The Major visited us twice at Baikonur. Certain information had to be kept from him; informants followed his every step, listened in to his phone calls and intercepted his e-mails. As far as I am aware they never found anything suspicious, just as they never found anything suspicious about any of us who worked with Major Johnson.

Just like in my locker, they found nothing in my flat either. I am sure Krylov ordered a search and that he participated personally. In as much as I know him, this was done at least a few months before the decision was made that I would be the next man to be sent into space. Just in case. This way there was enough time to replace me were they to find anything suspicious. But they did not find cause for concern. In any case I haven't got very much in my flat. It is a one bedroom apartment in a block of flats that used to be reserved for officers of the Soviet army.

Two decades ago it was possible to buy the flats. The influx of army officers had waned, the flats were no longer in demand and the buildings had to be maintained. It was easier to sell than to maintain. Once the flats were sold the maintenance was no longer the army's concern. Suddenly it no longer mattered where staff lived; from then on the army no longer had to bother about whether the light bulbs in the corridors worked or whether the gas supply was disrupted. These problems were now the sole responsibility of the new owners. The occupants at the time were given priority as buyers. The price was ridiculously low. My predecessor bought a one bedroom flat for the price of a smallish car. Six years later his widow sold the flat to me for the price of two cars. The men I work with could not understand why I was buying the flat. Just like the rest of us, you have an army flat at your disposal. Do you think that will ever change?, they kept asking me. It can't possibly! Not as long as they keep moving us about like this. And if you are thinking about the time you will retire, you are mad! Do not even think about that time now. I kept repeating that I think buying a flat in Baikonur is a good investment as sooner or later foreigners will start coming here, but everyone just laughed at me so I stopped talking about it.

I was satisfied with the price of the flat. It was partly furnished. The previous owner left me the oven, the fridge, a table and two chairs in the kitchen. I put a radio on the table and a digital clock on top of the fridge. The bathroom was equipped as well. There was a new heater above the bath tub. I furnished the living room that also serves as a bedroom and is the main living area of my flat. I bought a large cupboard, shelves, a pull-out sofa and a comfortable armchair. Apart from my clothes and uniforms I keep in the cupboard, I have a collection of army manuals, an encyclopaedia and a few other books on the shelves. I also keep my documents and a small photo album with seven photos in the drawer of the cupboard. I have a newish TV set in the central recess of the cupboard and a hi-fi on the shelf underneath. I have a collection of CDs with recordings of symphonies by classical Russian composers. The last part of the cupboard is a bar. A light switches on when I open the door. In there I keep a few bottles of vodka and six crystal glasses. The armchair in which I sit when I watch TV is opposite the cupboard. Above it I have an icon of Saint Anastasia. To remind me of Old Kyrill.

I sit in a comfortable padded chair with my legs folded against my chest and hands supporting my head. I look at space through the porthole. Thousands of stars shimmer in the sky. I have been staring at these celestial bodies for ages and thinking about all sorts of things. I have a feeling I have returned to my youth when I would often ask myself where I was before I was born and where will I go when I die. How long is eternity and what comes after it? I would ask myself how far space extended and what was beyond it. Of course I never found any answers. I don't have any today either. I cannot be sure whether at three hundred and eighty five thousand metres above Earth I am any closer to the answers. I fear that this will just raise further questions to which I will never find the answers. Neither up here, nor down there.