

Numbers in the Dark

and Other Stories



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Translated from the Italian

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Beheading the Heads

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I must have arrived in the capital the day before a festival. They were building platforms in the squares, hanging up flags, ribbons, palmfronds. There was hammering everywhere.

The national festival?' I asked the man behind the bar.

He pointed to the row of portraits behind him. 'Our heads of state,' he said. 'It's the festival of the heads of state, the leaders.'

I thought it might be the presentation of a newly elected government. 'New?' I asked.

Amid the banging of the hammers, loudspeakers being tested, the screeching of cranes lifting platforms, I was forced to keep things short if I was to be understood, and yell almost.

The man behind the bar shook his head: they weren't new, they'd been around for a while.

I asked: The anniversary of when they came to power?'

'Something like that,' explained a customer beside me. The festival comes round periodically and it's their turn.'

Their turn for what?'

To go on the platform.'

What platform? I've seen so many, one at every street corner.'

'Each has his own platform. We have lots of leaders.'

'And what do they do? Speak?'

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'No, speak, no.'

They go on the platform, and then what?'

What do you think they do? They wait a bit, while things are being prepared, then the ceremony is over in a couple of minutes.'

'And you?'

We watch.'

There was a lot of coming and going in the bar. The carpenters and the workers unloading things from trucks to decorate the platforms - axes, blocks, baskets - stopped by to have a beer. Whenever I asked someone a question it was always someone else who answered.

'It's a sort of re-election, then? A confirmation of their jobs, you could say, their mandate?'

'No, no,' they corrected me, 'you don't understand? It's the end. Their time is up.'

'And so?'

'So they stop being heads, living up there: and they fall down.'

'So why do they go up on the platforms?'

With the platforms you can see better how the head falls, the jump it makes, cleanly cut, and how it ends up in the basket.'

I was beginning to understand, but I wasn't quite sure. The heads' heads, you mean? The leaders'? In the baskets?'

They nodded. 'Right. The beheading. That's it. Beheading the heads.'

I'd only just arrived, I didn't know anything about it, I hadn't read anything in the papers.

'Just like that, tomorrow, all of a sudden?'

When the day comes it comes,' they said. "This time it falls midweek. There's a holiday. Everything's shut.'

An old man added, pontificating: When the fruit is ripe you gather it, and a head you behead. You wouldn't leave fruit to rot on the branches, would you?'

The carpenters had been getting on with their work: on

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some of the platforms they were erecting the scaffolding for grim guillotines; on others they were anchoring blocks for use with axes and placing comfortable hassocks beside (one of the assistants was testing the arrangement by putting his head on the block to check that the height was right); elsewhere people were setting up things that looked like butcher's benches, with channels for the blood to run off. Waxed cloth was being stretched on the platform boards, and sponges were already in place to clean up any splashes. Everybody was working away enthusiastically; you could hear laughter and whistling.

'So you're happy? Did you hate them? Were they bad leaders?'

'No, what gave you that idea?' they exchanged looks of surprise. 'They were good. Or rather, no better and no worse than anyone else. Well, you know what they're like: heads of state, leaders, commanders ... to get one of those jobs ...'

'Still,' one of them said, 'I liked this lot.'

'Me too. And me,' others agreed. 'I never had anything against them.'

'So aren't you sad they're killing them?' I said.

What can you do? If someone agrees to be a leader he knows how he'll end up. He could hardly expect to die in his bed!

The others laughed. 'That'd be a fine thing! Someone rules, commands, then, as if nothing had happened, stops and goes back home.'

Someone said: 'Everybody would want to be leader then, I'm telling you! Even me, look, I'd be up for it, here I am!'

'Me too, me too,' lots of them said, laughing.

'Well I wouldn't,' said one man with glasses. 'Not on those terms. What would be the point?'

'Right. There'd be no point in being boss on those terms,' several of them agreed. 'It's one thing doing a job like that when you know what to expect, and quite another... but how could you do it otherwise?'

The man with the glasses, who must have been the best educated, explained: 'Authority over others is indivisible from the right of those others to have you climb the scaffold and do away with you, one day in the not too distant future ... What authority would a leader have without the aura of this destiny around him, if you couldn't read it in his eyes, his sense of his end, for every second of his mandate? Civil institutions depend on this dual aspect of authority; no civilization has ever used any other system.'

'And yet,' I objected, 'I could quote you cases ...'

'I mean: real civilization,' insisted the man with glasses, 'I'm not talking about barbarian interregnums, however long they may have lasted in the history of peoples.'

The pontificating old man, the one who'd talked about fruit on branches, was muttering something to himself. He exclaimed: 'The head commands so long as it's attached to the neck.'

What do you mean?' the others asked. 'Do you mean that if for example a leader went beyond his term and, just for the sake of argument, didn't get his head cut off, he'd stay there ruling, his whole life long?'

'That's how things used to be,' the old man agreed, 'in the times before it was clear that whoever chose to be leader chose to be beheaded in the not too distant future. Those who had power hung on to it...'

I could have interrupted at this point, quoted some examples, but no one would listen to me.

'So? What did people do?' they asked the old man.

They had to cut their heads off willy-nilly, with brute force, against their wishes! Not on appointed days, but when they just couldn't put up with them any more. That's what used to happen before things were organized, before the leaders accepted...'

'Oh, we'd just like to see them try not to accept!' the others said. 'Oh we'd like to see that!'

'It's not the way you think,' interrupted the man with the glasses. 'It's not true that the leaders are forced to undergo ex-

ecutdon. Say that and you miss the real meaning of our statutes, the real relationship that binds our leaders to the rest of the people. Only heads of state can be beheaded, hence you can't wish to be a head without also wishing for the chop. Only those who feel they have this vocation can become heads of state, only those who already feel themselves beheaded the moment they take up a position of authority.'

Litde by litde the customers in the bar had thinned out, each going back to his work. I realized that the man with the glasses was talking exclusively to me.

"That's what power is," he went on, 'this waiting for the end. All the authority one has is no more than advance notice of the blade hissing through the air, crashing down in a clean cut, all the applause you get is no more than the beginning of that last applause that greets your head as it rolls down the waxed surface of the scaffold.'

He took off his glasses to clean them on his handkerchief. I realized his eyes were full of tears. He paid for his beer and left.

The man behind the bar bent down to my ear. 'He's one of them,' he said. 'See?' He pulled out a pile of portrait posters from under the bar. Tomorrow I have to take those ones down and stick up these.' The first picture showed the man with the glasses, an ugly enlargement from a passport photo. 'He's been elected to succeed the ones on their way out. Tomorrow he'll be taking over. It's his turn, now. If you ask me it's not right to tell him the day before. You heard the way he was talking about it? Tomorrow he'll be watching the executions as if they were already his own. They're all like that, the first days; they get upset, excited, they make a big deal of it. "Vocation": what pompous words they come out with!'

'And afterwards?'

'He'll get used to it, like everybody else. They have so much to do, they don't think about it any more, until their day comes around. But then: who can see into a leader's mind. They give the impression they're not thinking about it. Another beer?'

Television has changed a lot of things. Once power was remote, distant figures puffed up on a platform, or portraits assuming expressions of conventional pride, symbols of an authority that could barely be related to any flesh and blood individual. Now, with television, the physical presence of politicians is something immediate and familiar to us; their faces, blown up on the screen, visit the homes of private citizens every day; quietly sunk in their armchairs, at leisure, everybody can pore over the slightest movement of the features, the irritated twitch of eyelids under spotlights, the nervous moistening of the lips between one word and the next... In its death throes in particular, that face, so well known from the many close-ups of formal or speech-making postures on both solemn and festive occasions, betrays itself completely: it is at that moment more than any other that the simple citizen feels his leader is his, is something that will always belong to him. But even before that, in all the preceding months, every time the citizen saw the leader appear on the small screen, strutting about his duties - opening some building project, for example, or pinning medals on worthies' chests, or just climbing down the steps of aeroplanes waving an open hand — he was already searching that face for painful spasms, trying to imagine the convulsions that would precede rigor mortis, to guess from the delivery of his speeches and toasts how the death rattle would sound. It is in this that the public man's ascendance over the crowd consists: he is the man who will have a public death, the man whose death we are sure to be there for, all together, and that is why so long as he lives he will enjoy our interested, anticipatory concern. We can no longer imagine what it was like in the past, in times when public men died in private: we laugh today when we hear that they described some of their erstwhile procedures as democratic; for us democracy can only begin once we are sure that on the appointed day the television cameras will frame the death throes of our ruling classes to the last man, and then, as an epilogue to

the same programme (though many will switch off their sets at this point), the investiture of the new faces who are to rule (and to live) for a similar period. We know that in other times just as today the mechanics of power were based on killings, on slaughters whether slow or sudden, but aside from rare exceptions the victims then were shadowy folk, subordinates, hard to identify; often the massacres went unreported, were officially ignored, or given specious justifications. Only this now definitive conquest, this unification of the roles of torturer and victim, in continuous rotation, has allowed us to quench every last flicker of hatred and pity in our minds. The close-ups of the mouth yawning open, of the carotid throbbing in the starched collar, of the raised hand that clutches and tears at a breast sparkling with medals, are watched by millions of viewers with the serene absorption of one observing the movement of the heavenly bodies in their recurrent cycles, a spectacle all the more reassuring the more alien we find it.

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You don't want to kill us already, do you?

The words were pronounced by Virghilij Ossipovic with a slight trembling in his voice that contrasted with the almost bureaucratic though often harsh and polemical tone of the discussion so far and thus broke the tension in the meeting of the 'Volja i Raviopravie' movement. Virghilij was the youngest member of the Executive Committee; a thin down of hair darkened a prominent lip; locks of blond hair fell over his oblong grey eyes; those red-knuckled hands, their wrists always sticking out from shirt sleeves that were too short had not trembled when they primed the bomb beneath the Tsar's carriage.

Grass-roots activists took up all the places round the low, smoky basement room; most of them sitting on benches and stools, others crouched on the ground, others on their feet leaning against the wall, arms folded. The Executive Committee sat

in the centre, eight boys bent over a table laden with paper, like a group of students intent on the final slog before the summer exams. To the repeated interruptions fired at them by the activists from all four corners of the room, they answered without turning or raising their heads. Every now and then a wave of protest or agreement swept through the meeting and - since many got to their feet and pressed forward - seemed to converge from the walls on the table, there to wash over the backs of the Executive Committee.

Liborij Serapionovic, the heavily bearded secretary, had already and on several occasions pronounced the stony maxim he often resorted to to soften irreconcilable differences: 'Where comrade parts company with comrade, there enemy joins hands with enemy', and in reply the assembly had intoned with one voice: The head still at the head after the victory, victorious and honoured the day after shall fall' - a ritual warning that the 'Volja i Raviopravie' activists never forgot to direct at their leaders whenever they spoke to them, and that the leaders themselves would say to each other as a form of greeting.

The movement was struggling to establish, on the ruins of autocracy and of the Duma, an egalitarian society in which power would be regulated by the periodic execution of the elected heads. The movement's strict rules, all the more necessary as the imperial police stepped up their repression, demanded that all activists obey Executive Committee decisions without argument; at the same time every text setting out the movement's theory reminded the leaders that no exercise of authority was admissible unless by those who had already renounced enjoyment of the privileges of power, those who to all intents and purposes were no longer to be considered as among the living.

The young leaders of the organization never thought of the fate that a still Utopian future held for them: for the moment it was tsarist repression that unfortunately guaranteed an ever more rapid turnover in their numbers; the danger of arrest and execution was too real and immediate for the notional future of the theory

to take shape in their imaginations. A youthfully ironic, disdainful attitude served to repress in their minds what was nevertheless the distinguishing element in their doctrine. The grass-roots activists knew all this, and just as they shared the risks and hardships of the committee members, so they understood their spirit; and yet they nursed an obscure awareness of their destiny as executioners, a destiny to be fulfilled not only at the expense of the *status quo*, but of the future government too, and being unable to express themselves any other way, they would flaunt an insolent attitude, which, while always expressed in the formal tones of the meeting, nevertheless weighed down on their leaders like a threat.

'So long as the enemy before us is the Tsar,' Virghilij Ossipovic had said, 'foolish is the man who would seek the Tsar in his comrade.' It was an untimely thing to say perhaps, and certainly badly received by the noisy assembly.

Virghilij felt a hand gripping his own; sitting on the floor at his feet was Evghenija Ephraimovna, knees pulled up in her pleated skirt, hair knotted on her neck and hanging at the two sides of her face like spirals from a tawny coil. One of Evghenija's hands had found its way up Virghilij's boots to encounter the young man's fingers closed in a fist, it had skimmed the back of that fist, as though in a consolatory caress, then dug sharp nails into it scratching slowly until they drew blood. Virghilij realized that there was a precise and stubborn determination guiding the floor of the meeting today, something that had to do with them, the leaders, in person, and that would soon be revealed.

'Let none of us ever forget, comrades,' Ignatij Apollonovic, the oldest member of the Committee and with a reputation for being a peacemaker, attempted to calm the waters, 'what must not be forgotten ... in any event, it is only right that you remind us from time to time ... although,' he added, chuckling in his beard, 'when it comes to reminding us, Count Galitzin and his horses' hoofs are only too reliable ...' He was alluding to the commander of the Imperial Guard who had recently torn one of their protest marches to pieces with a cavalry charge at Maneggio Bridge.

A voice, it wasn't clear where from, interrupted him with: 'Idealist!' and Ignatij Apollonovic lost his way. 'Why's that?' he asked, disconcerted.

'Do you think we need do no more than keep the words of our doctrine uppermost in our minds?' said a tall lanky fellow from another part of the room, a man who had made a name for himself as one of the most militant of recent recruits. 'You know why our doctrine can't be confused with those of all the other movements?'

'Of course we know. Because it's the only doctrine which once it has achieved power cannot be corrupted by power!' grumbled a shaved head bent over papers, and that was Femja, the one the others called 'the ideologue'.

'So why wait till the day we've got power, my lovey-dovey comrades,' insisted the lanky fellow, 'to put it into practice?'

'Here, now!' the cry was raised from various parts of the room. The Marianzev sisters, known as 'the three Marias' stepped forward between the benches, chirping 'Excuse me! Excuse me!' and catching their long tresses on things. Carrying tablecloths folded over their arms, humming to themselves and pushing aside the boys, it was as if they were laying table for a snack on the veranda of their house in Izmailovo.

'What's different about our doctrine is this,' the lanky fellow went on with his sermon, 'that the only way to write it is with a sharp blade on the bodies of our beloved leaders!'

There was a mill of people and benches turning over because many in the meeting had got up and rushed forward. The ones who shoved and shouted most were the women: 'Sit down, little boys! We want to see! Mother of God, what hotheads! We can't see anything at all here!' and they thrust their school-mistressy faces between the men's backs, short hair under peaked caps lending an air of resolution.

There was only one thing could shake Virghilij's courage, and that was female hostility, even the slightest sign of it. He had got up, sucking the blood from Evghenija's scratches on the back

of his hand, and he had scarcely spoken those words: 'You don't want to kill us already, do you?' when the door opened and in came a procession of people in white coats pushing trolleys laden with glittering surgical instruments. From that moment on something in the mood of the meeting changed. There was a sharp patter of voices, one hard on another. 'Of course not... who said anything about killing you? ... you're our leaders ... with how much we like you and everything... what would we do without you? ... there's still a long way to go ... we'll always be here beside you...' and the lanky fellow, the girls, those who a few moments before had seemed to constitute the opposition, were now falling over each other to encourage the leaders, in reassuring; almost protective tones. 'It's only a little thing, significant, yes, but not serious in itself, no no no, a bit painful, for sure, but it's so we can see you as our real leaders, our well-loved leaders, a mutilation, that's all, when it's done it's done, a little mutilation every now and then, you're not going to get mad about such a litde thing, it's what marks out the leaders of our movement, what else if not that?'

Already the members of the Executive Committee had been immobilized by scores of strong arms. Laid on the table were gauze, basins with cotton wool, serrated knives. The smell of ether filled the room. The girls laid things out quickly and carefully, as if they'd all been practising their tasks for some time.

'Now the doctor will explain everything properly. Come on, Tòlja!'

Anatòl Spiridionovic, a medical degree begun and never finished, stepped forward holding red rubber-gloved hands high over an already obese stomach. He was a strange character, Tòlja, a man who perhaps to hide his shyness would put on a comic, infantile grin and come out with a string of witticisms.

'The hand ... Ah, the litde handy pandy... the hand is a prehensile organ ... oh yes, very useful... that's why we have two of them ... and of fingers, as a rule, we have ten... every finger is made up of three bone segments, or phalanges ... or at

least that's what they're called in our part of the world ... phalanx, middle phalanx, terminal phalanx ...'

'Stop it. You're getting on our nerves! What do you want to do, give us a lecture!' People grumbled. (In the end nobody liked this Tòlja fellow.) 'Let's get to the real thing! Come on! Let's get down to it!'

The first person they brought out was Virghilij. When he realized they were only going to amputate the first phalanx of his ring finger, he recovered his nerve and bore the pain with a pride worthy of his reputation. But some of the others screamed; it took several people to hold them down; fortunately sooner or later most of them fainted. There were different amputations for different people, but generally speaking no more than two phalanges for the more important leaders (the other phalanges would be cut off later a few at a time; one had to remember there would be many of these ceremonies over the years to come). Blood loss was greater than expected; the girls mopped up carefully.

Lined up on the tablecloth, the amputated fingers looked like small fish, throats pierced by the hook and pulled to the bank. They soon went dry and black, and, after a brief discussion as to whether diey should be kept in a showcase, they were thrown in the bin.

This system of pruning the leaders bore excellent fruit. In exchange for relatively small physical impairment, a great improvement in morale was achieved. The leaders' authority grew with periodic mutilation. When a hand with missing fingers was raised above the barricades, the demonstrators rallied round and the lancers on their horses were submerged in a crowd they couldn't break up. The singing, the thuds, the neighing, the shouts - 'Volja i Raviopravie!', 'Death to the Tsar!' 'Victorious and honoured the day after shall fall!' — ranged in the icy air, wafted over the banks of the Neva, reached the Peter and Paul fortress, penetrated the deepest cells where imprisoned comrades beat their chains to the rhythm and stretched out their stumps through the bars.

Every time they reached out a hand to sign a document or make the kind of terse gesture that would stress something in a speech, the young leaders found themselves looking at their amputated fingers, and this had an immediate mnemonic effect, establishing an association of ideas between the organ of command and time getting shorter. More than anything else it was a practical system: the amputations could be carried out by simple students and nurses, in improvised operating rooms, with whatever instruments came to hand; if found and arrested by the ever menacing police, the punishment for a simple mutilation was not serious, or at least nowhere near as severe as those they would bring on themselves if the theory's prescriptions were followed to the letter. It was a time when the straightforward killing of the leaders would not have been understood, either by the authorities or public opinion; the executioners would have been condemned as murderers, the imagined motive, rivalry or revenge.

In every local organization and at every level of the movement, a group of activists, distinct from the leaders and whose members were constantly being changed, took charge of the amputations; they established the frequency and the parts of the body, they arranged for the purchase of disinfectants, and, availing themselves of the advice of an expert or two, they themselves handled the instruments. It was a sort of committee of wise men, but with no influence over political decisions which remained strictly in the hands of the Executive Committee.

When the leaders began to run short of fingers, they looked into the possibility of one or two anatomical variations. The first thing to attract their attention was the tongue; not only did it lend itself to further resections of slivers or fibrils, but in symbolic and mnemonic terms it was exactly what they were after: every little cut directly affected vocal and oratorical ability. But the technical difficulties inherent in the delicacy of the organ were greater than was at first thought. After an early series of

operations, tongues were discarded, and the committee fell back on more obvious but less taxing mutilations: ears, noses, a tooth or two. (As far as amputation of the testicles was concerned, though not absolutely ruled out, it was almost always avoided, since it could lend itself to sexual innuendo.)

There's a long way to go. The hour of revolution has yet to strike. The leaders of the movement continue to subject themselves to the scalpel. When will they take power? However late it is, they will be the first leaders not to disappoint the hopes others have placed in them. Already we see them parading through flag-draped streets the day of their investiture: lurching on wooden legs if they still have one of their own intact; pushing walking frames with one arm if they still have an arm to push with, faces hidden in feathered masks to hide the more repugnant mutilations, some holding aloft their own scalps as trophies. At that point it will be clear that it's only in what little flesh is left them that power can be incarnated, if any power there is still to be.