

ALSO BY ROBERT LITTELL

FICTION

A Nasty Piece of Work

Young Philby

The Stalin Epigram

Vicious Circle

Legends

The Company

Walking Back the Cat

The Visiting Professor

An Agent in Place

The Once and Future Spy

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Mother Russia

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Sweet Reason

The Defection of A. J. Lewinter

NONFICTION

For the Future of Israel (with Shimon Peres)

VLADIMIR M.

A NOVEL

ROBERT LITTELL

Translated from the Russian by
R. LITZKY



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Suicide in German: Selbstmord or self-murder

Every poet's death is murder.

—Marina Tsvetaeva, Russian poet who murdered herself in 1941,
in a 1926 letter to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke

*Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!*

—W. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Don't come. We were mistaken.

—Manya Schwartzman's note, smuggled back to her
relatives in Bessarabia from Russia, where she'd
gone to join the Bolshevik Revolution, cited in
The Idea of an Unmarked Grave by Sandrine Treiner

P R E L U D E

Finally found the damn things, came across them the day I tiptoed past my eighty-sixth birthday hoping nobody would notice (nobody did, but as Lilya Brik would say, that's another story). They were stashed in a corner of the attic behind three trunks filled with God knows what, I sure as hell don't, in an old Soviet candy jar with Stalin's picture on it, his mustache atwitch with mildew. They were a sight for sore eyes: my old Peirce Model 55B Magnetic Wire Recorder and Reproducer tapes, five of them in all, each one meticulously wrapped in Cellophane turned brittle with age. Had to smuggle them out of Soviet Russia when I left, that was way back when, way back when being May of 1955, in case the customs people at the airport didn't appreciate four of Vladimir Mayakovsky's lady friends telling the butt-naked truth about the Poet who'd been turned into a national idol. Now that the ladies are deceased, I figure what they said is in the public domain and belongs on the public record. Hence this book. Face

it, there's a whole generation out there, in post-Soviet Russia, in the West, that never heard of a Russian poet named Vladimir Mayakovsky. These tapes might whet appetites—what these ladies said, back in March of 1953, in room 408 of Moscow's deluxe Hotel Metropol—sure as hell whet mine. I mean, it isn't every day a young exchange student from Brooklyn, New York, USA, gets to hear four raunchy Russian ladies talk about their sex lives. Boy oh boy, did I get an education. Even the *Kama Sutra* doesn't have a position called *over-the-edge*!

So here goes nothing: For what it's worth, I personally vouch for the transcription of the five tapes, ditto for the translation as the ladies were speaking Russian. With the Soviet Union dead and hopefully buried (good riddance to rubbish is how I see it), my editor managed to dig out Mayakovsky's old police file from the KGB archives, as well as the two appendages to this book: a curious unpublished Mayakovsky film script, along with the cryptic cablegrams the Poet exchanged with the last but far from least of his lovers.

Read it and weep. I did.

Still do.

—R. LITZKY

Love Lane

Brooklyn Heights, New York

July 2015

The storytellers, who met at the Hotel Metropol Moscow, in 1953, are:

Lilya Yuryevna Brik, née Kagan: flaming redhead daughter of a prosperous Jewish jurist, lawful wedded wife of the smug literary critic Osip Brik, she was ready to swallow her pride and V. Mayakovsky's sperm to become lover of and muse to the Poet who couldn't decide which was more important to consummate: erections, poetry, or revolution.

Elly Jones, née Elisabeta Petrovna Zibert: anti-Bolshevik to the marrow of her Russian bones, she fled revolution in Petrograd and washed up on the shore of America convinced that the streets in the New World were paved with mahjong ivories. Swept off her feet by V. Mayakovsky when he visited New York in 1925, she provided the Poet with bed, board, and intercourse. The coupling was not without consequences.

Tatiana Yakovleva du Plessix, Tanik to her friends and rivals: the stunningly elegant, brazenly opinionated White Russian Parisian émigré from Soviet Russia who claimed to have Tartar blood in her veins and looked as if she had stepped right out of a page of *Vogue*. Homesick for her native country, she settled for the next best thing: a love affair with a tourist from Moscow, V. Mayakovsky. But she insisted that the Poet respect her virginity when he fell head over heels in love with her during his sojourn in Paris.

Veronica Vitoldovna Polonskaya, nicknamed Nora (after her father's favorite mistress): V. Mayakovsky's last but far from least, Nora was a beautiful, talented, free-spirited, foul-mouthed blonde theater actress whom the Poet tried to sweet-talk into quitting her husband and career to become his mistress and muse. Her reluctance caused him great distress.

R., Litzky, a young American exchange student at Moscow State University majoring in Russian poetry, minoring in Fatal Flaws of Capitalism, who happened to own the only dictaphone in Moscow, a Peirce Model 55B Magnetic Wire Recorder and Reproducer. He was recruited to record V. Mayakovsky's four lovers reminiscing about the Poet who had commended two of them to the tender loving care of Comrade Government.

F I R S T
S E S S I O N

Revolution is not for the weak of heart. . . .

Nora: I'll start the ball rolling if you like. I take my cue from those two unambiguous words they throw onto the silver screen moments before the houselights come up: *The end*. That's where I'll begin—

Tatiana: Are you seriously suggesting the end of a story is more instructive than the beginning?

Nora: Don't be thickheaded, Tanik! I'm suggesting that the end is *discernible* from the beginning. And in that sense the end and the beginning are more often than not indistinguishable from each other.

So: You know what he can do with his pompous *Comrade Government, ensure a decent life for them*. The son of a bitch can shove it up his delicate poetic asshole is what he can do. The cunt! The *prick!* Hang on, I'm one jump ahead of you, ladies. You will

want to know how is it possible to be both cunt and prick simultaneously. I grant you it defies logic, it defies common sense, it defies conventional wisdom about male versus female anatomy, for all I know it defies gravity, but what the fuck, he managed it. The Poet was both cunt and prick when he did what he did to us. Christ, when he did what he did to *me!*

Lilya: As for me, I'm more comfortable starting at the start:

In the years before the Revolution, our lifelines had crossed now and then, here and there—the occasional literary soiree in the airless cellar of the Stray Dog, the notorious poetry reading in the Polytechnical Museum that turned into a free-for-all (punches were exchanged, chairs broken, the police had to be summoned), a cabaret performance of Georgian folk dances by the teenage prodigy Georgi Balanchivadze, impromptu picnics on the Moskva River when Mayakovsky was courting my gorgeous younger sister, Elsa, ah, yes, I mustn't forget that deliciously furtive Bolshevik district committee meeting in the Kotov Textile Factory outside of Moscow—but I never paid much attention to him, perhaps because he never paid much attention to me, perhaps because he basked in attention and took it as his due, and I never give the male of the species his due if the withholding of it can make him uncomfortable. Truth is Vladimir Vladimirovich seemed to be more interested in my husband, Osip Maksimovich. The two of them had been drafted in 1916 and served in the same Petrograd motor brigade. Neither ever heard a shot fired in anger. Their job was to meet the trains coming up from the great military base at Mogilev in Byelorussia and ferry majors and colonels and generals, all of them weighted down with colorful medals, to the city's grand hotels for a night of passion with their mistresses. The way Osip told it, the two chauffeurs spent

the nights stretched out on the backseats of French Renaults waiting for their charges to emerge from this or that hotel deluxe, with Osip reading, by flashlight, all twelve novels and twenty-nine short stories of Leon Tolstoy and Mayakovsky whiling away the endless hours writing verse in his Day Book. God knows how but Osip managed to get himself promoted to the rank of Commissar, an event the two motor brigade drivers promptly celebrated by going on a binge in a Petrograd whorehouse. My Osip and Volodya kept in sporadic touch after their less than glorious military careers came to an end. More recently Osip had arranged, at his own expense, to get several of the Poet's poems printed in journals and was trying to organize the publication of a collection of Mayakovsky's verse in pamphlet form, an undertaking worthy of Sisyphus given the rationing of paper due to the Great War.

This absence of personal chemistry between us changed the night Osip and I showed up at the Poet's Café on the Arbat in Moscow for what had been billed as a *mano a mano*: the two young titans of Russian poesy would be facing off on the future of Futurism. I can still conjure the scene in the café's main room. It was jam-packed with what my Osip (who, like most intellectual snobs, instantly recognizes other intellectual snobs when he is obliged to rub elbows with them) called the Great Tongue-Tied: highbrows bound into the intellectual's straightjacket of grammatical correctness and casual incivility. The air was thick with cigarette smoke, the floorboards were littered with a carpet of cigarette ends and reeked of stale beer, which is what the Tongue-Tied drink when they manage to pocket an advance against royalties for something they might or might not actually write. From time to time slivers of soundless lightning, evidence of a distant thunderstorm, turned the café's art nouveau stained

glass windows opaque for a fraction of a second. Several of the Tongue-Tied, seeing the bursts of light, speculated that revolution, expected any day, might have begun. Alas, they were mistaken by several months and had to be laughed down by individuals with umbrellas who recognized inclement weather when they saw it. In the back, under the storm-illuminated windows, stood a gaggle of factors gesticulating with their hands and fingers as if they were deaf and dumb. Osip supposed them to be selling tsarist bonds to finance a new stretch of the Trans-Siberian rail line. He was dead wrong. They turned out to be betters laying odds on who would emerge the winner from the poetic confrontation.

The wooden chairs in the large square room had been arranged as if two primitive tribes were facing off against each other. Set slightly forward from their respective camps were two bar stools for the principals. In the one corner, at twenty-six, lean, long-jawed with deep-set burning eyes, sat Boris Pasternak, only just arrived in Moscow on a sledge from the Urals, still wearing a long coat covered with dust kicked up by the troika of horses. In the other corner, Vladimir Mayakovsky, the enfant terrible of Russian poetry who carried a chip on his shoulder and wore his anger on his sleeve, and somehow managed to look as if he had just come away from a street brawl. Several years younger and half a head taller than his rival, he was dressed in a thread-bare city suit with one of his signature radishes jammed into the buttonhole—Mayakovsky, you see, had a dark side, he claimed a metaphorical affinity for people and plants that grew *into* the ground. Oh, he certainly stood out in the crowd with that yellow bow tie fastened to a dirty cardboard collar, the hem of his long coat weighted down with dried mud, his mop of thick uncombed (and presumably unwashed) black hair awry, a scruffy stubble of

a beard on his pasty cheeks. Rocking agitatedly on his bar stool, he fetched a small notebook from an inside pocket of his long coat, moistened a thick thumb on his thick tongue and flicked through the pages to the one he wanted. He studied it for a long moment, then closed the notebook and, squinting sightlessly over the heads of the Tongue-Tied, clearing his throat as if he needed to cough up an obstruction in it, he began declaiming his poem, in turns ranting, whispering, raging, mumbling, mocking, whining, winnowing, all the while gasping for breath when he ran short of it. (I run short of breath just remembering it.) I had heard poetry read out before but never like this. He seemed to be trying to startle his audience into the poem, to detonate cultural revolution with words forced out of context, with metaphors that defied common sense. It was a revelation of what poetry could be when it wasn't hostage to tense or grammar or syntax or rhythm or rhyme or reason or our miserable preconceptions of what verse ought to sound like. At moments it came across as a whirlwind of what the future might hold when revolution reached Russia, at others a dry gust that stirred remembrances of the lovers who had recently committed suicide together so their skeletons, buried in the same coffin, would be intertwined for eternity. Here's the thing: *Stolypin's tie* (which is how we'd christened the hangman's noose of Imperial Russia), the endless Great War, the foothills of Russian corpses that the Hun stacked in front of his trenches in place of sandbags, the Tsar's obliviousness to the craving for land and bread and an end to the slaughterhouse—all of this had conspired to make conventional poetry pointless. Olya thought it a matter of the Tongue-Tied writing on the wrong subjects in a dumb way. And suddenly this ruffian poet with the fists of a pugilist, this frowzy émigré from an allegorical steppe, seemed like the right person writing on the

right subject in an original way. Stripping poetry of its traditional poetic diction, he crafted a language all his own, one that corresponded to a world distorted by great wars, by industrial revolution, by city slums infested with poverty and misery. Invented words bubbled to the surface—to quote Mayakovsky—like a “naked prostitute fleeing a burning brothel.” The poem he blurted out over the heads of the Tongue-Tied—the poem that changed my life!—was his *Cloud in Trousers*, a delirious *depoetized* declaration of anguished love that he had composed for one of his countless mistresses but eventually dedicated to me. I stumbled across that little detail when my Osya paid to get a small edition of Mayakovsky’s *Cloud in Trousers* into print and I discovered “To you, Lilya” on the title page. My parents had named me Lili after one of Goethe’s beloveds, Lili Schönemann, but from that moment on, anointed by the Poet Mayakovsky, I became Lilya to Vladimir Vladimirovich, Lilya to Osip, Lilya to my sister Elsa, Lilya to everyone. If today I am Lilya to all of you here in this hotel room, it’s thanks to Mayakovsky’s dedication. Here are several of the lines that are seared on my brain:

*There’s no gray in the hair of my soul,
no fogey softheartedness!
The very sound of my voice makes the earth quake
As I stride across it—me, a beautiful
twenty-two-year-old.*

Ah, and this:

*If you want,
I can be consummately tender,
not a man, but—a cloud in trousers!*

Already something of a celebrity, Mayakovsky had a knack for taking possession of a room crammed with people, then inciting them to riot with his poetry. The Poet was known to argue insolently with people who contradicted him or identified seeming inconsistencies in his point of view. Which is why Osip had dragged me against my will to the Arbat café and the *mano a mano*. He expected tantrums. He expected pandemonium. He expected fisticuffs. He expected, metaphorically speaking, blood would be spilled and there would only be one poet still on his feet at the end of it.

Curiously, it didn't quite turn out the way Osip expected.

Pasternak listened intently as Mayakovsky declaimed his *Cloud in Trousers*, nodding all the while in what could have been taken (depending on which camp you were in) for appreciation or exasperation. There was a deafening silence when he reached the last line and, drained of energy, sank back onto his bar stool. Pasternak appeared to suck in the silence through his flaring nostrils. Then, to the general bewilderment of the spectators, he began slowly slapping one hand against a knee in what could only be interpreted as applause. "Interspersed with your stormy, imperfect passages," he said, "one constantly stumbles upon fragments of art, suggesting a talent that occasionally rises to the level of genius. May-a-kov-sky," he added, articulating each syllable of each word, "is a po-et's po-et."

"He is a *pathetic* poet," snarled a bearded magazine editor who was known to detest Mayakovsky. "He woos fame as if she were a woman, then pretends, when he has beguiled her into his bed, he isn't sure she suits him." Spittle glistened on two silver teeth in his lower jaw as he spat out the word *pathetic* a second time.

In the airless room you could actually hear people pulling

apprehensively on their cigarettes. Mayakovsky slid off his stool and waded into the Tongue-Tied, a ghost of a grin visible on his bloodless lips, his coal black eyes fixed on the magazine editor as he grabbed his lapels and lifted him clear of the chair. Seeing the terror in the man's eyes, Mayakovsky settled him with exaggerated gentleness back into his seat. "I came across a man begging on the Arbat this morning," he said as he made his way back to his stool. "He was dressed in rags that once passed for an army uniform, with a tin cup at his feet to collect money, and sang operatic arias a cappella so off-key it was pathetic. And because he was pathetic people understood he was desperate and stooped to give him a coin. If I am, as he says, a pathetic poet, the same people will understand, when I read my miserable poems in public, how desperate I must be, and I shall gain my livelihood better than an authentic poet like Pasternak here."

Grinning in satisfaction, the Poet hefted himself onto the stool. "In any case," he said, eyeing the offending magazine editor, "neither I nor the singer on the Arbat are nearly as pathetic as the editor of a pseudo-intellectual rag of a magazine that honest citizens buy so as to have a supply of toilet paper."

Mayakovsky had the Tongue-Tied in the palm of his hand now. Fortified by the mocking laughter he had incited, he hollered "Settle down, my kittens," and, turning to Pasternak, invited him to recite something not yet published. Pasternak, formal to a fault, bowed from the waist in the style of a Russian peasant, then, rising to his feet, said, "I shall say the poem, which I call 'Hamlet,' and then repeat it a second time as I am never understood at the first reading. Here," he went on, "is the Danish Prince Hamlet speaking to his father's ghost. Or Christ speaking to *His* Father in the garden of Gethsemane. Or me speaking to you. Who can be sure?"

*I am trying, standing in the door,
To discover in the distant echoes
What the coming years may hold in store.*

*But the plan of action is determined,
And the end irrevocably sealed.
I am alone; all round me drowns in falsehood:
Life is not a stroll across a field.*

When he reached the last line and looked up, I remember murmuring to my Olya, “So much for the fireworks you promised.”

“Wait,” he said, and hoping to light the fuse that would ignite the powder keg, Osip—who, in his youth, had been expelled from school for spreading Bolshevik propaganda—called out, “There are things afoot more important than poetry. Instead of lulling us into a nonalcoholic stupor with your verses, incite us with your views on revolution.”

“Make no mistake about it, friends,” Mayakovsky said, his eyes suddenly feverish, “revolution, not evolution, is the solution to our tribulations. It’s not a matter of impatience. It’s a matter of justice. Those of us who can see further than our noses embrace the chaos of revolution, we embrace the risk of revolution, we embrace Marx’s dazzling dream of liberating man from ignorance, religious dogmatism, and the class prison into which he was born. Revolution will change the way we perceive this world, the way we relate to one another, the way we love our lovers. Women will be the equal of men in bed and in the workplace. It will free artists from having to drag around fetid creeds like medieval balls and chains. It will permit us to spit out the past, which is stuck like a bone in our throats. It will transform

the language we use to describe the world we see. Revolution is the last, best hope for Tsarist Russia. And revolutionary Russia is the last, best hope for the petrified fossil Europe.”

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