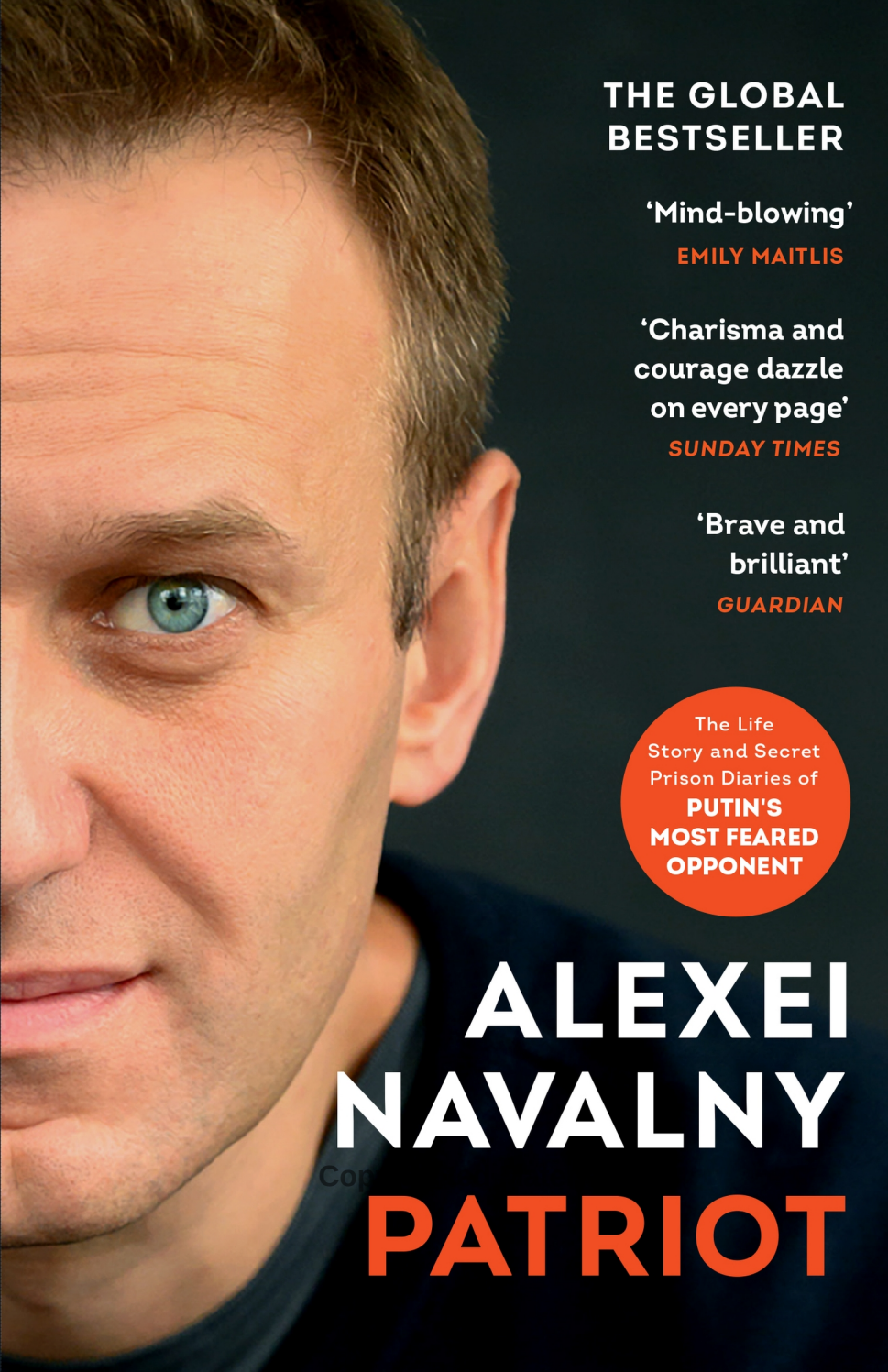
THE GLOBAL BESTSELLER
'Mind-blowing'
EMILY MAITLIS
'Charisma and courage dazzle on every page'
SUNDAY TIMES
'Brave and brilliant'
GUARDIAN
The Life Story and Secret Prison Diaries of
PUTIN'S MOST FEARED OPPONENT
ALEXEI NAVALNY
PATRIOT

## Praise for *Patriot*

**Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography**
**A *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestseller**
**A *Financial Times*, *New Statesman*, *Economist*, *Evening Standard* and Waterstones Best Book of 2024**
**Winner of the Westminster Book Award for Best Book by a Non-Parliamentarian**
**One of President Obama's Best Books of 2024**

'Mind-blowing . . . one extraordinary read' Emily Maitlis

'The greatest political figure of his generation' *Observer*

'Part memoir, part diary, a political manifesto, a darkly funny adieu' Ben Macintyre

'*Patriot* will be seen as a historic text' *The Economist*

'A brave, passionate and intimate read' *i Paper*

'A worthy testament to Navalny's courage, defiance and humour' *Financial Times*

'This book is a gospel' *Vanity Fair*

'Inspiring, emboldening – a voice that will not be forgotten' *New Yorker*

'Funny, fiery, reflective and tragic' *New York Times*

'*Patriot* . . . is going to be an important part of their fight going forward' Alastair Campbell, *The Rest Is Politics Leading*

'Extraordinary . . . An insightful, sharp, and even humorous account of the fight against Putin's regime – and a warning to the world. A brave . . . and brilliant book' Luke Harding, *Guardian*

'Remarkable . . . [Navalny] is the greatest political figure of his generation – the greatest president many Russians believe they never had . . . *Patriot* is less a memorial than a handbook on how to stand up to a bully . . . with humour and grace and without fear' Carole Cadwalladr, *Observer*

'Charisma and courage still dazzle on every page. His voice is so vivid – fearless, playful, funny, clear-eyed – that while reading *Patriot* I kept finding myself forgetting he was dead' Decca Aitkenhead, *Sunday Times*

'[*Patriot*,] part memoir, part diary, is a political manifesto, a darkly funny adieu and a posthumous indictment of his murderers. But it is also a poignant paean to reading and the solace of the written word for a man deprived of freedom' Ben Macintyre, *The Times*

'Inspiring, emboldening – a voice that will not be forgotten' David Remnick, *New Yorker*

'Funny, fiery, reflective and tragic, laced with Navalny's trademark wry humour and idealism' Alexandra Alter, *New York Times*

'*Patriot*, by the murdered Russian opposition leader, will be seen as a historic text . . . Its value lies not in what it tells you about the cruelties of Mr Putin's regime, but in what it reveals about the human spirit' *The Economist*

'Much has been written about the chilling realities of Putin's Russia. Yet . . . Alexei Navalny is in a class of [his] own . . . Unflinching, defiant and even hopeful, the book [is] a shocking and extraordinary "memorial"'
Frederick Studemann, *Financial Times*

'Alexei Navalny was among the greatest, smartest, most charismatic and effective leaders that the Russian opposition has had . . . Here we feel his bravery and great spirit' *The Times*

'A gripping posthumous account of Navalny's long confrontation with Putin . . . Compelling, impressive' *Daily Telegraph*

'The most memorable political book of the year . . . In *Patriot: A Memoir*, Alexei Navalny left us an exhilarating read' *Guardian*

'This book is a gospel . . . impossible to stop reading . . . [Navalny] is not going to be the political leader for future generations of Russians. But he might be the moral example – some kind of Russian messiah' *Vanity Fair*

'Extraordinary . . . *Patriot* offers insight into his hopes of a "beautiful Russia of the future". It also gives us a window into the oppressive grimness of life in prison. As the world faces an uncertain future, this book reminds us that there are still people willing to die for freedom' *Evening Standard*

'Powerful . . . A brave, passionate and intimate read about everything from family to activism' *i Paper*

'His only weapon words, Navalny skewers Putin's tyranny, corruption and lies, but even while inhumanly caged, his humour, love of life and ultimate faith in humankind shine through' *New Statesman*

'Alexei Navalny never loses faith that his cause is worth suffering for . . . [*Patriot*] is a testament to a famed dissident's extraordinary battle against despair as the Russian authorities gradually increase their crackdown against him' *Independent*

'Moving . . . it is fitting that the book, which was compiled under Yulia's supervision, is titled *Patriot* . . . Alexei Navalny was the most credible opposition leader to emerge in Russia in decades, and his death is a devastating blow' *New Statesman*

'Like all tyrants, Putin cannot bear challenge, and even less mockery . . . This memoir, completed as Alexei Navalny's testament, stands as a poignant vision of a possible better Russia' *Times Literary Supplement*

'*Patriot* is revealing – and devastating. We all know Navalny's final chapter, which makes the descriptions of his treatment – and his courage in the face of it – even more poignant . . . In the end, *Patriot* is also a love story about two people fully committed to a cause they believe in' BBC News

'The memoir is a chance to commune with the mind of a dissident . . . shocking . . . As a I read, I grieved, not just for Navalny the man, but for the idea of a person like him' *Atlantic*

'*Patriot* is a plea to keep resisting Putin . . . Honest, full of penetrating wit and with a nice ear for mockery, [Navalny] wielded cheerfulness as a weapon and never lost faith that the right side must eventually prevail' *Washington Post*

'Reads like a crime thriller . . . you devour line after line about all that was hidden from the world at the time' *Die Welt am Morgen*

'He was unyielding, so they had to break him. But still, Navalny shouts with a voice that makes the foundations of the Kremlin tremble' NRK

'[*Patriot*] is not only an autobiography, but also Navalny's last great reckoning with his enemy in the Kremlin' *Tagesspiegel*

'A thoroughly political book – and at the same time it is a great love story' *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

'I could not put [this book] down . . . incredibly moving' Rachel Maddow

## ALEXEI NAVALNY

Alexei Navalny was a Russian opposition leader, an anti-corruption campaigner, and political prisoner who won international recognition and respect. His many international honours included the Sakharov Prize, the European Parliament's annual human rights prize. Alexei Navalny's poisoning in 2020 by the Russian security services was a global news event. In 2024 he was killed in a brutal Arctic prison.

*Patriot* was published to global acclaim in October 2024.

'Sharing his story will not only honour his memory but also inspire others to stand up for what is right and to never lose sight of the values that truly matter'

YULIA NAVALNAYA

ALEXEI NAVALNY

# Patriot

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
Arch Tait with Stephen Dalziel



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Vintage, Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk/vintage
global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK

First published in Vintage in 2025
First published in hardback by The Bodley Head in 2024
First published in the United States of America by Alfred A. Knopf in 2024



Translated by Arch Tait with Stephen Dalziel
Chapters 15 to 18 were translated by Stephen Dalziel

All photographs are courtesy of the Navalny family unless otherwise stated

Book design by Casey Hampton



Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781529933659

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



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# FOREWORD

*Yulia Navalnaya*

AUGUST 29, 2025

I was totally against writing a foreword for the first edition of Alexei's book. To me it felt wrong. I was convinced that any kind of foreword, no matter who wrote it, would only distract from the book itself.

But time has passed. Almost a year. I could say that the pain has eased, that grief has loosened its grip, but that wouldn't be true. All that's happened is that more days have gone by.

Every morning, I still wake up thinking of him. What would it be like if he were here beside me? I'd open my eyes and he'd be looking at me, smiling. We'd spend the morning joking together, then we'd each go about our day, messaging one another and sharing news. And still, I would miss him. In the evening we'd be together again: having dinner, laughing, teasing the kids, asking about their day, offering advice—while they rolled their eyes in reply. And then we'd go to bed, and he would take my hand before falling asleep. Just as he had every night, all those years we were together. Nothing extraordinary. Just a normal, happy family.



Now he is gone. No more of his good sense. No more of his self-deprecation and his calmness. No more of his jokes, nei-

ther the brilliant ones, nor the silly ones I so often grumbled at. No more of that boundless love he shared so generously—not just with me and the children, but with everyone around him.

What remains with me now is this book. And, in a way, it is him. That is my husband, Alexei Navalny.

Over this past year, I've received hundreds of messages from people I've never met—from New Zealand to Alaska. They write: "What a great man." "What a hero." "How wise he was." "How full of life." And they are right. Every word is true. That's exactly how and who he was. Many readers say that *Patriot* tells the story of a great man and his extraordinary fate. For me, it is the story of the person dearest to me.

*Patriot* has it all: childhood memories, parents, the fear of a bad grade, learning to stand up for yourself in the schoolyard, the envy of a classmate with cool jeans or a brand-new tape recorder. We all have stories like that, right? Then you grow older. The world becomes larger, more complicated. You search for your place, you make mistakes, you learn. That too is familiar to everyone. And then comes adulthood, when you try to fit everything in: love, children, parents, friends, work—and also how to make that work your life's calling. Isn't that what we all dream of?

Alexei managed it all. Moreover, he was able to write about it so compellingly that you can't put the book down. As you read, you find yourself thinking on every page: *Imagine that—that's pretty much how it was for me, too.*

Let me share one of my memories with you about how Alexei wrote this book.

I must confess, I was especially looking forward to the chapter about how we met. By that point, he had already written a lot about other things—about events that happened after our meeting—and still that chapter wasn't there. I began dropping little hints: "So where is it?" "I'm curious!"

He would laugh it off, saying he didn't know how to approach it, he wasn't sure what to write, and that it felt a little awkward sharing such personal memories.



And then one day, that chapter appeared—the first draft. I

read it . . . and, to be honest, I was horrified! *But it wasn't like that at all!* I thought. *I remember it completely differently.*

I wrote him back a letter in prison telling him that things were completely different from how he remembered them. I laid everything out in detail, point by point, just as I remembered it. He replied with humor, writing, "Isn't it true what they say—that a man and a woman remember the same relationship in completely different ways?"

So you will read that very version—just as Alexei remembered it. And as for me . . . someday I will write my own version, as I remember it.

This book is not about fighting a dictator. It is not about a revolutionary. It is not about a hero on the barricades. This book is about a person. Just an ordinary person. Someone like me. Someone like you. Someone like the countless others around us.

Yet it is precisely such a person—true to themselves, honest, sincere, unwavering—who can achieve what seems impossible. Through their example, they can inspire. Through their actions, they can unite. Through their conviction, they can move what seems immovable.

Reading this book, you may also find yourself feeling a little . . . like a criminal. An accomplice, in a way. There's a certain thrill, isn't there, in being part of something forbidden? Because in the summer of 2025, *Patriot* was officially declared an extremist book in Russia. So, as you read, keep that in mind. And maybe it'll make you smile. Smile at the absurdity that has long become the norm in today's Russia. Smile at the cowardice of a regime that continues to fight Alexei even after his death.

When Alexei was alive, Vladimir Putin was afraid to even say his name. Now he bans his words. His thoughts. The thoughts and words of an ordinary, honest person. A responsible citizen. I know this book will not leave anyone feeling indifferent.

# PATRIOT

PART I

# NEAR DEATH

# 1

Dying really didn't hurt. If I hadn't been breathing my last, I would never have stretched out on the floor next to the plane's toilet. As you can imagine, it wasn't exactly clean.

I was flying to Moscow from Tomsk, in Siberia, and feeling very pleased. Regional elections were going to be held in two weeks in several Siberian cities, and my colleagues from the Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF) and I had every intention of inflicting defeat on the ruling United Russia party. That would deliver an important message that Vladimir Putin, even after twenty years in power, was not omnipotent, or even particularly liked in that part of Russia—even though large numbers of people there would watch talking heads sing the praises of the nation's leader on television 24/7.

For several years I had been banned from running for office. The state did not recognize the political party I led and had recently refused to register it for the ninth time in eight years. Somehow we always "failed to fill in the forms correctly." On those rarest of occasions when one of our candidates actually got his or her name on the ballot, the most far-fetched pretexts were found to deny them eligibility. The challenge facing our

network—with as many as eighty regional offices at its height, one of the largest in the country and under constant attack by the state—therefore required a schizophrenic ability to win elections from which we were banned.

In our authoritarian country, where for more than two decades the regime had made it a priority to inculcate a belief in the electorate that it is powerless and can't change anything, it wasn't ever an easy matter to persuade people to turn out and vote. But then again, their income had been falling for seven years in a row. If even a third of those fed up with the regime could be enticed into the voting booths, not one of Putin's candidates would have a chance. But how to get the people to vote? By persuasion? Offering rewards? We chose the option of getting people really pissed off.

For the last several years my colleagues and I had been filming a never-ending soap opera about corruption in Russia. Of late, almost every episode had garnered three to five million views on YouTube. Given the realities of Russia, from the outset we turned our backs on the pussyfooting journalistic approach of endless qualifiers—"alleged," "possible," "purported"—so beloved by legal advisers. We called a thief a thief, corruption, corruption. If somebody had an enormous estate, we did not merely point out its existence, but rather videoed it with drones and showed the property in all its magnificence. And we learned its value and juxtaposed it with the modest income the bureaucrat who owned it was declaring officially.

You can theorize all you want about corruption, but I've preferred a more direct approach—like studying the wedding photographs of the president's press secretary and, as he kisses the bride, focusing on the spectacular watch peeping out from his shirtsleeve. We obtained certification from a Swiss supplier that the watch costs $620,000, and exposed it to the citizens of our country, where one person in five is living below the poverty line—$160 a month, which would be more accurately described as the destitution line. Having sufficiently enraged your viewers with the brazenness of corrupt officialdom, you then point them to a website which lists who in their region

they should vote for if they don't want to continue to support their bureaucrats' life of luxury.

It worked.

We simultaneously entertained and outraged our audience with images of the life led by the "humble patriots governing our land," explaining how the mechanisms of corruption work and calling for practical actions to cause maximum damage to Putin's system. We never ran out of material.

Gazing out of the plane window, I was considering the fact that we now had enough footage to upload two or three YouTube videos on corruption in Siberian cities. They would be viewed by several million people, several hundred thousand of whom living in Novosibirsk and Tomsk. These people would not only watch them but be sufficiently infuriated to heed our call to go to the polls and vote against the candidates of Putin's party.

I smiled wryly as I recalled the ways the state authorities, who knew what we were up to, had tried to stymie our plan. For officials at every level, my trips throughout Russia were like a red flag to a bull. They considered my visits threatening and fabricated endless criminal charges to hamper my traveling around the country, because a criminal defendant cannot leave his region of residence. Since 2012, I had spent a year under house arrest, and several more under an injunction forbidding me to leave Moscow.

Two months before, at the instigation of the state-controlled TV propaganda channel Russia Today, another ludicrous criminal case had been opened against me on a charge of "slandering a war veteran," accompanied by another order prohibiting me from leaving Moscow. I considered the restriction illegal, ignored it, and went to Siberia on this latest investigation trip. My colleagues and I were bringing home hundreds of gigabytes of footage, including interviews with the local opposition and a video of a residence of a pro-government parliamentary deputy on a strictly private island. The footage had been encrypted and uploaded to the server and was ready for editing.



I was looking forward to defeating United Russia in Tomsk

and giving it at least a bloody nose in Novosibirsk. It was a satisfying thought that despite the increasing intimidations—over the past two years there had been more than three hundred raids on our offices, people in black masks sawing doors out of their frames, searching everywhere, seizing phones and computers—we had only grown stronger. Naturally, the more pleasing this was to me, the more displeasing it was to the Kremlin and to Putin personally. This was probably what provoked his giving the order to "initiate active measures." That is the phrase traditionally used by KGB and FSB officers when they write their memoirs. Get rid of the person and you get rid of the problem.

In everyday life all sorts of bad things can happen to people. You might get eaten by a tiger. Someone in a hostile tribe might spear you in the back. You might accidentally amputate a finger while trying to show off your culinary skills to your partner, or lose your leg while operating a chain saw in the garage without paying attention. A brick can fall on a person's head or someone might fall out of a window. And there are all the usual heart attacks and other tragedies, distressing but unsurprising.

Few of my readers, I hope, will have been speared in the back or fallen out of a window, but it is easy enough to imagine what it might feel like. Our life experiences and observation of others enable us to know such sensations vividly. Or that is what I thought before boarding that plane.

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In deference to the conventions of the detective story, I will try to relate everything that happened that day as precisely as possible on the time-honored principle that the tiniest detail might provide the key to unlocking the mystery.

It is August 20, 2020. I'm in my hotel room in Tomsk. The alarm clock goes off at 5:30 a.m. I wake without effort and make my way to the bathroom. I take a shower. I do not shave. I brush my teeth. The roll-on deodorant is empty. I rub the dry plastic over my armpits before discarding the applicator in the trash basket, where it will be discovered a few hours later by my colleagues when they come to search the room. Draping myself in the largest towel hanging in the bathroom, I go back

to the bedroom and think about what to wear. I need underwear, socks, a T-shirt. Being one of those people who falls into a slight stupor when choosing clothes, I gaze for perhaps ten seconds at the items in my open suitcase.

An embarrassing thought crosses my mind. Can I wear yesterday's T-shirt? I will, after all, be home in five hours, where I'll shower again and have a change of clothing. No, it wouldn't be right. One of my colleagues might notice and think the boss was behaving like a vagrant.

The hotel returned my laundry yesterday, so I take a T-shirt and socks out of the package. There is clean underwear in the suitcase. I dress and look at my watch: 5:47. I must not miss the plane: it is Thursday, and I am a slave to Thursdays. Every Thursday, come what may, I go live at 8:00 p.m., expressing my opinion on the last week's events in Russia. *Russia of the Future with Alexei Navalny* is one of the country's most popular streams, watched live online by 50,000–100,000 people, with up to 1.5 million views garnered after posting. The audience has not fallen below a million this year. (If it hadn't been Thursday, I would have stayed in Siberia a couple more days. Today, two colleagues will travel with me, and several others will stay behind to finish the job.)

It's 6:01. I hate being late, but as usual I haven't remembered to pack everything: my belt is lying on the chair. I have to open the suitcase, put it in, and perform the exercise familiar to anyone who has tried to close an overfull suitcase. I bear down on it with all my weight, zip it up, and mentally implore it not to split open when I take my hand away and stop pressing.

At 6:03, I am downstairs in the hotel lobby, where Kira Yarmysh, my press secretary, and Ilya Pakhomov, my assistant, are already waiting. We get into the taxi Ilya has ordered and head for the airport. On the way, the driver stops at a gas station; it's a bit unusual, because they normally fill up in between passengers, but I quickly forget about it.

At the airport we find the same idiotic arrangement as everywhere else in Russia. You have to pass through a metal detector with your bags before you even enter the building.

This involves standing in two lines and passing through two checkpoints. It's all very slow, and there is invariably a guy in front of you who forgets to take his phone out of his pocket. The scanner beeps. He's also forgotten to take off his watch. The scanner beeps again. Mentally cursing the moron, I walk through the frame and, of course, the scanner beeps. I forgot to take off my watch. "Sorry!" I say to the passenger in line behind me, and read in his eyes everything I myself was thinking ten seconds before.

I'm not going to let such nonsense spoil my mood. Soon I'll be home, the working week will be over, and I'll spend the weekend with my family. What a great feeling.

Kira, Ilya, and I are soon standing in the middle of the terminal, a classic group of people on a business trip in the early morning. There's an hour before takeoff. We look around, wondering what to do until our flight is called.

"Why don't we go and have a cup of tea?" I suggest. So we do.

I should have drunk my tea more elegantly, since there is a guy sitting three tables away furtively taking a video. He will post my hunched figure on Instagram with the caption "Navalny spotted at Tomsk airport," and it will later be viewed an impossible number of times and analyzed second by second. It will show a waitress coming up and giving me tea in a red paper cup. Nobody else touches the cup.

I go into an airport store called Souvenirs of Siberia and buy candy. As I go to pay, I try to think of a joke for when I present it to my wife, Yulia, once I get home. Nothing comes to mind. No matter, I'll think of something.

Boarding is announced, and at 7:35 we show our passports and get on the bus that will drive us the 150 meters to the plane.

It is a crowded flight, and there is a bit of a commotion on the bus. A guy recognizes me and asks for a selfie. Sure, no problem. After that, other people shed their inhibitions, and perhaps ten more squeeze toward me to get a photo. I smile happily into other people's phones and, as always at such moments, wonder how many really know who I am and how

many have decided to take a photo just in case I'm somebody. This is a perfect illustration of Sheldon Cooper's definition in *The Big Bang Theory* of a minor celebrity: "Once you explain who he is, many people recognize him."

As we head onto the plane, there are more photographs, and Kira, Ilya, and I are among the last to take our seats. This makes me anxious because I have a backpack and a suitcase that need to be stowed. What if all the overhead bins are already taken? I don't want to be the sad passenger who rushes around the cabin asking the crew to find a place for his hand luggage.

In the end, everything is fine. There is room overhead for the suitcase, and I put my backpack between my feet at the window seat. My colleagues know I much prefer to sit by the window so they can insulate me from anyone who might want to discuss the political situation in Russia. I'm generally happy to chat with people, just not on a plane. There is always a lot of background noise, and I really don't relish the prospect of having a face twenty centimeters away shouting at me, "You investigate corruption, right? Well, let me tell you my case."

Russia is built on corruption and everyone has a case.

My mood, already great, gets even better as I look forward to three and a half blissful hours of complete relaxation. First I'll watch an episode of *Rick and Morty*, then read.

I fasten my seat belt and take off my sneakers. The plane starts moving down the runway. I delve into my backpack, take out my laptop and headphones, open the *Rick and Morty* folder, and choose a season at random, then an episode. I'm in luck again; this is the one where Rick turns into a pickle. I love it.

A passing flight attendant looks askance but doesn't ask me to close the laptop as mandated by an outdated aircraft security regulation. It's one of the perks of being a minor celebrity. Today is going really well.

Then it stops going well.

Thanks to that kind flight attendant, I now know precisely the moment when I felt that something was wrong. Later on, after eighteen days in a coma, twenty-six days in intensive care, and thirty-four days in the hospital, I will put on gloves, clean

my laptop with an alcohol wipe, open it, and discover that the episode was twenty-one minutes in.

It takes an event really out of the ordinary to make me stop watching *Rick and Morty* during takeoff—turbulence would not be enough—but I am looking at the screen and can't concentrate. Cold sweat begins to run down my forehead. Something very, very odd and wrong is happening to me. I have to close the laptop. Icy sweat runs down my forehead. There is so much that I ask Kira, who is sitting next to me on my left, for a tissue. She is absorbed in her ebook and, without looking up, takes a pack of tissues from her bag and hands it to me. I use one. Then a second. Something is definitely not right. It's not like anything I have ever experienced. It's not even clear what I'm experiencing. Nothing hurts. I just have a weird sense that my entire system is failing.

I decide I must be airsick from looking at the screen on takeoff. I say uncertainly to Kira, "Something is going wrong with me. Do you think you could talk to me for a bit? I need to concentrate on the sound of someone's voice."

It is, undoubtedly, a strange request, but after a moment's surprise Kira starts telling me about the book she is reading. I can take in what she is saying, but it involves an almost physical effort. My concentration is disappearing by the second. Within a couple of minutes I am only seeing her lips move. I hear sounds, but cannot understand what is being said, although Kira tells me later that I held out for about five minutes, muttering "Uh-huh" and "Aha" and even asking her to clarify what she'd said.

A flight attendant appears in the aisle with a cart—drinks. I try to think whether I should have some water. According to Kira, he stood there, waiting. I looked at him silently for ten seconds, until both she and he began to feel awkward. Then I said, "I guess I do actually need to step out."

I decided I should go and splash my face with cold water and that would make me feel better. Kira gave a shove to Ilya, who was asleep in the aisle seat, and they let me out. I was in my

socks. It wasn't that I didn't have the strength to put my sneakers back on; it was just that right at that moment I couldn't be bothered.

Luckily the toilet was free. Every action calls for reflection, although ordinarily we don't notice that. Right now I had to make a conscious effort to understand what was going on and what I needed to do next. This is the toilet. I must find the lock. There are things of different colors. This is probably the lock. Slide it this way. No, that way. Okay, there is the faucet. I need to press it. How do I do that? My hand. Where is my hand? There it is. Water. I need to splash it on my face. At the back of my mind there is just one thought, which does not call for any effort and crowds out everything else: *I can't take it anymore*. I rinse my face, sit down on the toilet, and realize for the first time: I'm done for.

I didn't think, *I'm probably done for*. I knew I was.

Try touching your wrist with a finger of your other hand. You feel something because your body releases acetylcholine and a nerve signal notifies your brain of the action. You see it with your eyes and identify it through your sense of touch. Now do the same with your eyes closed. You don't see your finger, but can easily tell when you touch your wrist and when you don't. That is because, after acetylcholine transmits a signal between nerve cells, your body secretes cholinesterase, an enzyme that stops that signal when the job is done. It destroys the "used" acetylcholine and with it all traces of the signal transmitted to the brain. If that did not happen, the brain would receive signals about the wrist being touched over and over, millions of times. It would be similar to a distributed denial of service (DDOS) attack on a website: click once and the site opens; click a million times per second and the site crashes.

To cope with a DDOS attack, you can reload the server or install a more powerful one. With human beings it's less straightforward. Bombarded by billions of false signals, the brain becomes completely disoriented, unable to process what is going on, and eventually shuts down. After some time a per-

son stops breathing, which, after all, is also controlled by the brain.

That is how nerve agents work.

I make one more effort and mentally check out my body. Heart? No pain. Stomach? Everything fine. Liver and other internal organs? Not even the slightest discomfort. All in all? Dreadful. This is too much, and I'm about to die.

With difficulty I splash water on my face a second time. I want to return to my seat, but don't think I will be able to get out of the toilet by myself. I won't be capable of finding the lock. I can see everything clearly. The door is in front of me. The lock is there too. I've got enough strength, but keeping that stupid lock in focus, reaching out, and sliding it in the right direction are all very hard.

Somehow I manage to get out. There is a line of people in the passageway, and I am able to see they are not happy. I've probably been in the toilet longer than I thought. I'm not behaving like a drunk—I don't stagger, nobody is pointing at me. I'm just another passenger. Kira told me afterward that I left my window seat quite normally, getting past her and Ilya easily enough. I just looked very pale.

I am on my feet in the aisle and tell myself to ask for help. But what can I ask the flight attendant? I can't even articulate what is wrong or what I need.

I look back toward the seats but then turn the other way. Now I am facing the galley, five square meters with meal carts—the place you walk to on a long flight if you want something to drink.

Real writers are special people, you know. When I am asked what it's like to die from a chemical weapon, two associations come to mind: the Dementors in *Harry Potter* and the Nazgûl in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. The kiss of a Dementor does not hurt: the victim just feels life leaving. The main weapon of the Nazgûl is their terrifying ability to make you lose your will and strength. Standing in the aisle, I am kissed by a Dementor and a Nazgûl stands nearby. I am overcome by the impossibility of understanding what is happening. Life is draining away, and I

have no will to resist. I'm done for. This thought swiftly and potently fully takes over from *I can't take it anymore*.

The flight attendant looks at me quizzically. He appears to be the same guy who pretended not to notice my laptop. I make one more effort to come up with words I can say to him. To my surprise I manage, "I have been poisoned and am about to die." He looks at me without alarm, surprise, or even concern—indeed, with a half smile. "What do you mean?" he asks. His expression changes radically as he watches me lie down at his feet on the floor of the galley. I don't fall over, don't collapse, don't lose consciousness. But I absolutely feel that standing in the aisle is pointless and silly. After all, I am dying and people die—correct me if I'm wrong—lying down.

I lie on my side. I stare at the wall. I no longer feel any awkwardness or anxiety. People start running around, and I hear exclamations of alarm.

A woman shouts close to my ear, "Tell me, are you feeling ill? Tell me, are you having a heart attack?" I shake my head feebly. No, I have no problem with my heart.

I have just enough time to think, *It's all lies, what they say about death*. My whole life is not flashing before my eyes. The faces of those dearest to me do not appear. Neither do angels or a dazzling light. I am dying looking at a wall. The voices become indistinct, and the last words I hear are the woman shouting, "No, stay awake, stay awake." Then I died.

Spoiler alert: actually, I didn't.

# 2

If you imagine that coming out of a coma is more or less instantaneous, as the movies would have us believe, I have to disappoint you. I would be only too glad to say that one minute I was dying on the plane and the next I opened my eyes to find I was in a hospital and looking at my beloved wife, or at least a team of doctors peering at me anxiously. That is not what happened. Getting back to normal life took several weeks of very unpleasant and persistent visions. The whole process was like a long-drawn-out and highly realistic journey through the circles of hell. It wouldn't surprise me if that whole concept was devised by people who had been in a coma and seen the same things I did. There was an unbroken succession of hallucinations, through which I occasionally glimpsed reality. As time passed, there was more reality and less hallucinating.

I can recall only isolated moments from the first few days. In one, I am sitting in a wheelchair and someone is shaving my face. I can't move a finger. In another, a kind person is washing my hands, seemingly a doctor. He tells me, "Alexei, please, say any word. I am going to write it down and show you."



That request was repeated day after day, and I slowly began to make sense of it. First I realized I was Alexei, then that

this was an exercise the doctor wanted me to do, and that my job was to say any word. My vocal cords were intact, the trouble was that I couldn't think of any words. I tried really hard but couldn't get through to the part of my brain responsible for thinking of words. To make matters worse, I couldn't explain to the doctor that I couldn't conjure up a word, because that also called for words and I simply didn't have any in my head. Responding to simple questions from the nurse, I would nod, but recalling and saying a whole word was more than I could manage.

I gradually began to gain a better understanding of what was going on, and even started saying things. Then I was given a pencil and asked to write something down, and my agonies began all over again: I had absolutely no idea how to write.

I was visited by my doctor more frequently than by anybody else. He was a very famous and respected neurosurgeon from Japan, a professor. He would talk to me at great length, quietly, carefully explaining what had happened, what kind of treatment I should expect, how long I would need for rehabilitation, and when I would finally be able to see my family. I was tremendously impressed by how professional and authoritative he was. He is the first person I remember clearly after emerging from the coma. He was a great guy, good-looking if slightly balding, serious, and highly intelligent. For some reason, though, he was also incredibly sad.

The nurses told me afterward that his two-year-old son had died in an accident, run over by a car in Japan. The professor had tried to save his son's life, operated on him himself, but, tragically, the child died in his arms. During one of the professor's visits he read me a haiku he had written in memory of his son. I had never heard anything so beautiful in my life. After he left, I couldn't get those heartrending lines out of my mind and quietly wept over them for several days.

When the professor was with me, though, I put on a brave face, not least because we were discussing a plan to get me back on my feet, which I really liked. Next week, the professor told me, I would be given new, bionic legs in place of my old ones,

which I had evidently lost. After that he would perform a tricky neurosurgical operation to replace my spine. The new one would be a big improvement because it would have four gigantic mechanical tentacles attached to it, just like Doctor Octopus in the *Amazing Spider-Man* series. I was rapturous.

Imagine my disappointment when I was told there was no Japanese professor, that all our talk and plans and long conversations had been one big hallucination, caused by my being given six different psychotropic drugs simultaneously. I was so stunned I demanded to see the entire hospital staff. Perhaps I had gotten some of the details mixed up and he was not a neurosurgeon but, say, a resuscitation specialist. Alas, there was no one at Charité—my hospital—who fit the description. I gave every impression of accepting that, as the doctors and my family were telling me, I had imagined the whole thing. I did, nevertheless, devote several hours to googling famous Japanese neurosurgeons on the off chance there was one whose son had died in an accident. If there wasn't, I would have to face the fact that I had been crying my eyes out for three days over a haiku I had made up myself.

I don't remember the first time I saw Yulia after the coma. There wasn't a moment when someone came into my ward, I opened my eyes, gazed at a beautiful woman, and thought, *Oh, Yulia is here. That's so great!* I wasn't recognizing anyone, and I had no understanding of what was happening around me. I just lay there, unable to concentrate. I do remember, though, that every day there was a best moment when "She" materialized beside me. She knew better than anyone else just how to adjust my pillow and how to talk to me. She didn't wail, *Oh, poor Alexei.* She smiled and laughed, and that made me feel better.

There was a large whiteboard on the wall opposite my bed in the intensive care unit. It had something drawn on it, but no matter how I tried, I couldn't figure out what it said. I stared at the board until suddenly I saw it had little hearts drawn on it. Some time later I noticed the number of hearts was increasing. Later still I started counting them and realized that all the time I was in intensive care, Yulia had been visiting and adding a new

heart each day. Looking at it, I managed one day to write something myself, on a piece of paper Yulia had given me. When she showed it to me after I got out of the hospital, there was no text, just something like the line on a cardiogram. For a while I could write only in a column. I learned to write properly, horizontally, a few weeks later, but for a long time afterward I was still muddling the order of letters in words.

One day, when I had a better handle on reality and was even gradually beginning to remember a little English, I asked the nurse for a drink of water. She said she would give me water just as soon as I wrote the word down, and she held out a pen. I could remember how to say "water" in English, but had no idea how to write it, no matter how hard I tried. I was beginning to get angry and again peevishly demanded water. "Try to write it one more time," the nurse said to me firmly. I scrawled over the paper, became infuriated, and in a fit of temper wrote down the word that suddenly popped up out of my subconscious—"fuck." Somewhat vindictively, but more with a sense of pride, I handed the piece of paper to the nurse. She looked at me sympathetically. I had written "fkuc."

I am trying to relate my memories in sequence, but the fact is that everything was a single mosaic of fragments of reality and dreams: the Japanese professor, the paper and pen, my having no legs, the hearts on the whiteboard, my having been in a terrible accident, Yulia, being in prison.

So there I was now, sitting on a bunk in a prison cell. The prison regulations were written on the surrounding walls, only they were not the usual sorts of rules but words from the songs of Krovostok, a famous Russian rap group. The guards were ordering me to read out the rules, that is, the lyrics, again and again, a thousand times. It was torture, and in the dream I was irate. Much later, after I had recovered my wits, I mentioned this in an interview, and the guys from Krovostok sent me a response on Twitter: "Lyosh,* sorry for the bad trip."

There was a huge television on the wall in my ward, and



* A short form of Alexei.

that presented yet another trial, only marginally less awful than my recurring delusions. As I gradually recovered my awareness, the medical staff tried everything imaginable to keep me entertained. They decided one day I might enjoy watching soccer. The trouble was that I'm not remotely interested in soccer. After some time, my colleague Leonid Volkov, who had come to visit, recognized there was a problem. "Why are you giving him soccer to watch? He hates it." The television was swiftly switched off, and although at the time I wasn't taking much in, I felt a great sense of relief.

Yulia and Leonid tried several times to tell me what had happened. For a while they had little success. It was as if they were knocking on a shut door, behind which was my brain, which was not replying. They told me about the poisoning; about my passing out on the plane; about the hospital in Omsk, full of FSB officers; about how for a long time the regime wouldn't let me be transferred from the hospital; about the evacuation to Germany . . . but I just sat there staring. They told me at length and in detail that Putin had tried to murder me while I was traveling around Siberia; that independent laboratories had confirmed I was poisoned and, moreover, with the same chemical agent the Russian secret services had used to poison the Skripals in Salisbury. And then when, yet again, they said the word "Novichok," I suddenly looked straight at them and said, "What the fuck? That's just so dumb!"

Leonid says that was the moment he knew I was going to be all right.

I gradually became more fully aware of what had happened, and remembered what had preceded it. No matter how fascinating and gripping the details of the failed attempt to murder me were, I was far more interested in how the elections in Tomsk and Novosibirsk had gone. Had we published our investigations on YouTube? Had people viewed them? Had people voted? Had we managed to beat United Russia? What percentage of the vote had our candidates received? On the night the ballots were being counted, I asked Yulia to read my

entire Twitter feed out loud. Then, with my speech slurred, I dictated messages for her to send to our colleagues.

The election results were better than we could have hoped for. In Tomsk, nineteen of the twenty-seven candidates we supported had won, including the coordinator of our local headquarters Ksenia Fadeyeva, and her deputy, Andrei Fateyev. In Novosibirsk, twelve candidates we supported were elected deputies, and the head of our office, Sergei Boiko, was one of them.

Even so, I didn't fully engage with reality until I was allowed to get out of bed for the first time and take a few steps on my own. I was not permitted that for a long time because I wanted to escape, and even made several attempts to do so. While I was slowly recovering my wits, I became aware there were always people standing outside my ward and watching me through the glass. They didn't look like doctors, and after I learned what had happened, it was explained to me that they were guards. One day I tried to persuade Yulia to grab their guns and help me escape. I felt an urgent need to flee. No gun was forthcoming. Next, I decided to take matters into my own hands: when I was alone, I tore off all the catheters and tubes that were attached to me, drenching the ward in blood, and tried to get up. Medics immediately rushed in and had me back in bed and reconnected in no time. I didn't give up that easily, though—I made several more breakout attempts in the following days.

When finally, with the doctors' permission, I was able to get out of bed myself and walk very haltingly the few steps to the sink, everything genuinely came back to me. I wanted to get washed, but my hands wouldn't obey me, and then there suddenly came to mind very vividly how a few weeks before I had been trying to wash my face in the bathroom on the plane from Tomsk to Moscow. I went back to bed, lay down, stared at the ceiling, and felt absolutely wretched. I was like a frail old man, unable to walk the three meters to the sink without trouble, unable to turn on a tap. I was afraid I was going to be like that forever.



Initially, it seemed I really would be. Getting back to living

normally called for a huge amount of effort. A physiotherapist came to see me every day. She was a nice person, but forced me to do the most difficult things I have done in my life. She asked me to sit at a table and handed me two cups. One had water in it; the other was empty. She gave me a spoon and instructed me to use it to scoop water from the full cup into the empty one. By this time I was able to speak quite well and said, "Well, okay, I can do five spoonfuls for you," but she demanded the impossible: "No, I need seven." Ultimately, with immense difficulty, I did scoop up seven spoonfuls and pour them into the other cup. I felt as if I had run a marathon.

I had yet to learn to walk normally, hold things, and coordinate movements. I had to catch a ball a hundred times a day. That was grueling. For many weeks, I couldn't master lying down on the floor from a standing position and then getting up. I could do that a maximum of three times, and it was very hard work.

I guess the most brilliant moment in intensive care was the day our children, Dasha and Zakhar, flew in from Moscow. But then we had a classically awkward moment. They couldn't hug me, because I was festooned with cables and tubes. It was also far from clear what we could talk about in a situation like this, so they just sat in the ward and I looked at them, and was blissfully happy.

September 23 was my last day at Charité, where I had spent more than a month. We got ourselves ready and packed everything, and for the first time I changed out of the hospital garb into normal clothes. I was going to be discharged at three o'clock, but then was asked to wait until six because my doctor wanted to look in on me one last time. The door opened and in came my doctor, followed by a lady who seemed vaguely familiar.

It was Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany. This came as a complete surprise. I already knew, of course, that she had played an important part in saving my life by pressuring Putin into agreeing to let me be transferred to Berlin. I wanted to shake her hand, or even give her a hug (I had temporarily become

very emotional since the poisoning), but quickly reflected that my tracksuit bottoms and T-shirt were already enough of a challenge to strict German protocol and that I shouldn't push my luck. For the next hour and a half we talked, mainly about Russian politics. Merkel was amazingly well informed on the subject, and I was greatly impressed by her detailed knowledge of our investigations, particularly the latest ones in Siberia.

Merkel's coming to see me was a very touching personal gesture and a smart political move. It was obviously going to rile Putin. As we were saying goodbye, I thanked her for all she had done. She asked what my plans were. I told her I would like to return to Russia as soon as possible. She said, "There's no need to hurry."

I was nevertheless obsessed with the idea of getting back to Moscow as quickly as I could. I really wanted to see in the New Year at home. Yulia stopped me. "Let's wait until you're fully recovered."

We stayed in Germany four more months.

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**SEPTEMBER 21, 2020***

A post about love.

Yulia and I had our wedding anniversary on August 26. We've been married for twenty years. I'm actually quite glad I missed it and can write this today, when I know a bit more about love than I did a month ago.

You will have seen the scene a hundred times in films and read descriptions of it in books: one person is lying in a coma, and their partner, through their love and ceaseless devotion, brings their beloved back to life. And, of course, that's exactly how it was with us, strictly in accordance with the canons of classic films about love and comas. I slept and slept and



* Some Instagram posts have been edited for clarity and to eliminate repetition. Not all of Alexei's Instagram posts from the period covered by this book are included.

slept. Yulia @yulia_navalnaya came to see me, talked to me, sang me songs, and played music for me. I cannot lie: I don't remember any of it.

But I will tell you what I do remember. Perhaps, actually, it can't even be properly described as a remembering. It is more a collection of my very first sensations and emotions. It was so important to me, though, that it is now forever imprinted in my brain.

I am lying there. I have already been brought out of the coma, but can't recognize anybody and don't understand what is happening. I can't speak and don't know what speaking is. My sole pastime is to be waiting for Her to come. Who She is I am uncertain. Neither do I even know what She looks like. If I manage to make out something with my unfocusing eyes, I'm unable to remember the picture. But She is different, that much is clear to me. So I just lie there and wait for Her. She comes and is the main person in the room. She straightens my pillow and makes it very comfortable. She doesn't have a low, sympathizing voice but speaks cheerfully and laughs. She is telling me something. When She is near, my idiotic hallucinations retreat. It feels very good when She is there. Then She goes away and I feel sad, and wait for Her again.

I don't for a moment doubt there is a scientific explanation for this. Like, you know, I was apprehending the tone of my wife's voice, my brain secreted dopamine, and I began to feel better. Each visit became literally therapeutic, and the effect of waiting for her enhanced the dopamine reinforcement. But no matter how impressive the scientific and medical explanation sounds, I now know for sure, simply from my own experience, that love heals and brings you back to life.

Yulia, you saved me, and may this be included in the neurobiology textbooks.

PART II

# FORMATION

# 3

The soldiers in the road were completely enveloped in unusual white suits. They wore gas masks that made them look like some strange species of animal. I come from an army family, and of course we had a gas mask at home, although the only purpose it served was to be put on by the children of friends of my parents who came to visit. They would run around the apartment, pretending to be an elephant and shrieking with delight. This could be done for only three minutes or so because it got very hot in the gas mask. The soldiers were not playing or having much fun at all. Rather oddly, they were stopping cars and letting them proceed only after monitoring their wheels with a special metal rod. I was nine, watching through the window of my father's Lada 6. It is one of my most vivid childhood memories. The soldiers' suits were no surprise to my parents in the front seat. They explained to me the suits were to protect the soldiers from radiation and dangerous chemicals. This was necessary because there had recently been an explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, seven hundred kilometers away. We were living in a military town near Obninsk, a restricted-access city where the first Soviet nuclear reactor had been built. We were on our way to

shop for food in Obninsk, which was well provisioned because of all the atomic scientists living there. "Provisioning" was an important Soviet term I already knew. It meant how good the choice of things in the shops would be. Some person in the dark reaches of the Soviet state planning system had arranged that there should be a 60 percent higher probability of finding sausage in a food shop in Obninsk than in the only grocery store in our army unit.

The metal rods in the hands of the soldiers were for measuring the radiation level on cars' wheels. The government had yet to admit the Chernobyl disaster was caused by negligence, so the official explanation for these demonstrative checks was to track down saboteurs. For this reason, security had been stepped up in every city that had a nuclear power plant. If spies (American, of course) were driving around the country intent on blowing up one power station after another, our armed forces would spot them from traces of radioactivity on their tires.

My mother pointed out, however, that even the fools in our town knew the real reason for the monitoring. The nuclear scientists from Obninsk who worked at Chernobyl had immediately understood the scale of the disaster. Despite the lies being put out on the news, many of them had swiftly bundled their families into cars and driven back to Obninsk. These measures were to identify them: their cars, their clothes, and they themselves would be giving off radiation. The authorities were lying about there being no threat, and desperately trying to prevent the radiation from spreading.

"That's enough about that," my father said angrily. He didn't want to talk about it.

In almost every town and village of the former U.S.S.R. there is a memorial to those who died in World War II. Most often the monument lists the names of the local people who never returned. If you visited the memorial in Zalesiye, Ukraine, a village a few kilometers from the Chernobyl power plant, you could read, among the other names, "Navalny, Navalny,

Navalny, Navalny." There is no way of knowing who among them are my relatives and who just have the same surname.

My father was born in that village. When he left school, he decided to join the army and go to a military college. He never lived in Ukraine again, serving instead in various military towns in Russia. His two elder brothers and his mother remained in Zalesiye. I went to stay with her every summer, and my relatives invariably tut-tutted about what a thin, pale Moscow townie I was and how they would have to fatten me up with good Ukrainian pork lard. All summer I was offered food in quantities a sumo wrestler might envy. I was transformed into a suntanned Ukrainian village boy who almost forgot Russian.

My grandmother was religious. She recited prayers and I memorized them, although I hadn't a clue what they meant. In the autumn I was given back to my parents, and my physical appearance was used as evidence in an endless, good-humored debate at mealtimes on the relative merits and demerits of Ukrainians and Russians. My mother had been born in Arkhangelsk, in the north of Russia, and grown up in Zelenograd, a district of Moscow, so she clearly was a member of an ethnic minority. Quizzed for the umpteenth time as to whether I was a Ukrainian or a Russian, I did my best to avoid a straight answer. It was like being asked whom you loved more, your mother or your father, to which no sensible answer is possible.

Chernobyl was the closest city to Zalesiye. It was where everyone went to shop and many of the villagers worked. It also had the nearest still-functioning church, and there, without my father's knowledge, my grandma had me baptized. Like any officer in the Soviet army, he was of necessity a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and therefore, by definition, an atheist. My grandmother feared it might come out that his son had been baptized and cause him to be expelled from the party. However, she feared God even more, so she took me to the church anyway and had me christened. Needless to say, this did not remain a secret for long. My mother and father soon heard from family members about the christening

but, contrary to Grandma's expectations, were not angry, only amused that she had been so worried.

Zalesiye was a paradise on earth. It had a stream and trees laden with cherries. After the herdsmen had brought the village cows home, I was in charge of Grandma's immense cow and, in the course of my duties, ordered it into the barn. That made me feel very cool. I was surrounded by the jolliest, most wonderful people: my uncles, aunts, cousins, godparents, and other relatives whose precise status and degree of kinship were often impossible to discover.

On April 26, 1986, at half past one in the morning, this paradise was destroyed when an explosion occurred in the fourth nuclear reactor of the Chernobyl power station. For the rest of the world it was a major nuclear disaster. For the U.S.S.R. it was one of the reasons for the collapse of a country already struggling under the economic crisis of "fully developed socialism." For the Ukrainian branch of our family it was a terrible tragedy that swept their old life away. For me, it was the first event, the first lesson in my life, that had a formative impact on my outlook. The radiation might be far away, but the hypocrisy and lies inundated the whole country.

A few days after the explosion, with the Soviet government already fully aware of the scale of the contamination, people living in the villages around Chernobyl, including my relatives, were sent to plant potatoes in the fields. Adults and schoolchildren were digging up ground on which radioactive dust had only recently settled. Of course, the local people knew something was up. Many worked in Chernobyl, and naturally some would have had friends working at the power station. The news of an explosion there spread lightning fast.

The authorities, of course, flatly denied it. It was obvious the regime was hiding something, which meant it had something to hide, but you couldn't say that openly. In 1986, it hadn't occurred to anyone that the Soviet Union and its vast apparatus for controlling thoughts and words would shortly cease to exist. So if you were told to plant potatoes, that was what you had to do. It was the most dangerous and harmful thing anyone could

have suggested, but was done to avoid spreading panic among the population!

The standard and completely moronic response of the Soviet—and subsequently of the Russian—authorities to any crisis is to decide that it is in the interests of the population that they should be lied to endlessly. Otherwise, the reasoning goes, people are sure to run out of their homes, rush around in a state of anarchy, set buildings on fire, and kill each other!

The truth of the matter is that nothing of that sort has ever happened. In most crises the population is prepared to behave in a rational and disciplined manner, especially if the situation were to be explained to them and they were told what needed to be done. Instead, as I have since seen on a less dramatic scale many times, the first official reaction is invariably to lie. There is no practical benefit to the officials doing so; it is simply a rule: In an awkward situation, lie. Play down the damage, deny everything, bluff. It can all be sorted out later, but right now, at the moment of crisis, officials have no option but to lie, because the imagined idiot population is not yet ready for the truth.

In the Chernobyl affair, it is pointless to look for even a scintilla of rationality. God forbid the people should have been told to stay indoors for a week and not go outside unless absolutely necessary. In Kiev, the capital city of Ukraine with a population in the millions, a May Day parade was held just five days after the explosion, for the same propaganda purposes—to pretend that all was well. We know now how these decisions were made. The leaders of the Communist Party, sitting in their offices, wanted foremost to ensure that neither the Soviet people nor—horror of horrors—foreigners should know anything about the atomic disaster. The health of tens of thousands of people was sacrificed in the cause of a grand cover-up that was ridiculous, because the radioactive fallout was so extensive it was registered by laboratories all over the globe.

Many years later, serving time in a special detention center after yet another arrest, I sat in my cell reading a collection of newly published materials from the archives. These were secret reports by the KGB branch of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist

Republic proudly documenting an extraordinary operation involving a journalist from *Newsweek* who had visited Ukraine sometime after the accident. Some twenty or so individuals had been involved in this operation, including members of special militia units and retired KGB agents. The KGB arranged it so that everybody the journalist interviewed was an intelligence officer, and all of them assured him the consequences of the accident were minimal and that the public was impressed and delighted by the efficient way the party and government had dealt with it. Vast resources had been brought to bear to deceive a single reporter because it was the appropriate thing to do. We could hardly allow enemy journalists to slander the Soviet reality by twisting the facts. Therefore, we would rather twist the facts a little ourselves.

None of these tricks were any more effective than the infamous grocery stores in North Korea in which plastic produce is strategically placed so foreigners being driven from the airport can see that bananas and oranges are freely available. For years now the foreigners have been merrily snapping photos of these stores as a tourist sight. *Hey, look over there! The famous fake fruit!*

Paradoxically, people in Washington, London, and Berlin knew more about what was really happening than those living in the contaminated zone. Our family did not know the whole truth, but we knew a whole lot more than most: when the party and government robustly denied the "contemptible insinuations of Washington's propaganda" about an explosion in Chernobyl, our relatives phoned and told us everyone in the region was aware there had been an explosion at the power station and that there were soldiers all over the place.

Then the nightmare began. Soon, everybody within thirty kilometers of the power plant was being evacuated, and no matter how glowingly state television reported a well-coordinated operation, we already knew better. Our numerous relatives had been dispersed all over Ukraine, to wherever empty accommodations, like Pioneer camps, could be found. People were

in despair. It was unbearable to be forced to abandon your farmstead, a home you had built with your own hands, especially since these people could be considered well-off by Soviet standards. We were the poor relatives compared to them, even though my father was in the army, which meant his pay was above average. We were just living a standard Soviet life in a military unit, with an apartment and a salary, while they, with their orchards and cows and private plots of land, were better provided for, at least in terms of food. Now they were leading their children to a bus and being driven away permanently to who knows where with only their identification papers and a minimal set of clothes. There were cows mooing and dogs barking, just like in films about the war. A couple of days later soldiers went around the villages shooting the dogs. A starving cow will just die, but dogs go feral, form packs, and might attack the few remaining people.

What a monstrous shambles it all was, and it could not be concealed. One of our most retold family stories gives a sense of the degree of the stupidity and muddle. A few hours before the relocation, my grandmother remembered she had fish drying in the attic. She was losing everything, but her youngest son so loved dried fish and she was determined to get some to him. She took it to the post office, put it in a pack, wrote our address on it, and handed it in. People in protective suits were walking the streets, and loudspeakers were warning that everything was contaminated and in no case should anything be taken with you unless it was absolutely vital. But to her amazement the post office, whose hours were also numbered, agreed to send it on. The fish duly arrived at our home in Moscow Region. It looked very appetizing, and my father decided he would enjoy it with a beer. Only when my mother kicked up a fuss did he agree to fetch a radiation meter. The fish was so radioactive it was as if an atom bomb had been dropped on it. My mother took it into the forest and buried it there.

A total of 116,000 people were evacuated. They needed new housing, new jobs, and compensation for the property they had

abandoned. Even for a rich, developed country that would be a big ask. For the U.S.S.R., with its planned economy, it was a nightmare. New homes were needed; new cars were needed.

Ronald Reagan liked telling Soviet jokes. "You know, in the U.S.S.R. to buy an automobile you have to pay in advance and then wait in line for ten years," one of them began. "This man, he laid down his money and then the fellow that was in charge said to him, 'Okay, come back in ten years and get your car.' And he said, 'Morning or afternoon?' And the fellow behind the counter said, 'Well, ten years from now, what difference does it make?' And he said, 'Well, the plumber's coming in the morning.' " That was not far from the truth. A car was a family's most prized possession, the most valuable item you were legally allowed to own, and here you were, having to abandon your own with little prospect of buying another. The waiting list to buy an outdated Fiat model manufactured in the U.S.S.R. under the VAZ brand was a staggering ten to fifteen years.

The Soviet Union was amazingly effective at producing propaganda and telling lies, but what was needed here was the ability to build houses in a hurry, and that was something it could barely do and certainly couldn't do well. Soldiers and workers were drafted from all over the country, and the quality of the resulting houses was abysmal. The need was to supply people with new possessions that were simply not available. What the state could do was transfer Soviet rubles to your account in the state-run Sberbank savings bank, but how were you supposed to replace those boots, made in Yugoslavia, for which you had traveled specially to Moscow and waited in line for five hours? There was nothing comparable in the shops. Or what about that tracksuit made in the German Democratic Republic with the word "PUMA" emblazoned on the back? Your old one was gone, and who was going to sew you a new one—Karl Marx? There was a dire shortage of anything of good quality—clothes, shoes, wallpaper, toilets. The planned economy was incapable of meeting the demand for even basic necessities. The population of 275 million citizens lined up every day to buy something