

In the House of the Poet

a novel

by Jan Brokken

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Synopsis

The novel *In the House of the Poet* opens on 13 April 1988, three days before the death of Youri Egorov, the master pianist who fled the Soviet Union in 1976. He has arranged to commit assisted suicide in the presence of his partner Jan Brouwer and close friend Tatiana, under a doctor's supervision. For at least ten months, he has been afflicted with AIDS, the mysterious new disease that has begun to lay waste to his circles of friends in New York and Amsterdam. Egorov hands his friend Jan Brokken twelve sheets of paper filled with dense writing, his diary from the first month after his defection in Italy. He spent it in a cell near Rome, waiting to be granted political asylum.

Egorov grew up in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan in Russia, where he was born in 1954 and began taking piano lessons at the age of six. His strict, ambitious mother made him study hard. He showed such promise that she later quit her job and took him to Moscow to learn from the great Yakov Zak, leaving the rest of the family behind in Kazan. At the Moscow Conservatory, Egorov's budding homosexuality made him a subject of gossip and a target for the secret police. No longer safe in the Soviet Union, he had no choice but to plan his escape. In 1976 Egorov left his family, without the opportunity to say goodbye. He never saw his father, mother, and two brothers again.

In a flashback to 1981, Brokken recalls his first meeting with Egorov. For five years, they have been living on the same canal in Amsterdam without knowing it. When Brokken first hears Egorov perform in a concert hall, he realizes it is the same pianist he can hear rehearsing every morning and decides to write a profile of the pianist for the *Haagse Post* newspaper.

Their first two conversations are stiff and awkward; Egorov is shy and suspicious of strangers. They soon warm to each other, but after their fourth conversation, Egorov tells Brokken that if he really wants to understand the life of a concert pianist, he should accompany him on tour. When they travel together, Brokken can see how demanding Egorov's chosen life is. The two men realize they have much in common, especially their love of Russian culture and poetry, and they strike up a tentative friendship.

Brokken often visits his friend in the afternoons, after his working day. By then, Egorov has finished practicing and is drinking tea while listening to old recordings or new additions to

his vast collection of LP records. On warm days, they sit out in front of the house drinking ice-cold vodka with lemon and discussing music, literature, and politics.

Egorov becomes part of a tight-knit circle of gay men leading a bohemian lifestyle, but chic receptions and openings bore him; he prefers to dazzle the locals with his pinball skills in the working-class cafés of the run-down Jordaan district. The longer Egorov stays in Amsterdam, the more Russian he feels. He relishes his conversations with Brokken about Russia and his opportunities to speak Russian with his intimate friend Tatiana from Brussels.

The day Egorov arrives in Amsterdam in 1976, he falls into conversation with a tall, skinny Dutchman, Jan Brouwer. From that meeting in 1976 to Egorov's death, the two of them live together in the centre of Amsterdam, in canal houses on the Brouwersgracht and later the Keizersgracht. During their late-night dinners and long conversations, they and their friends smoke joints, snort cocaine, and drink to excess. Egorov makes the most of the freedom he could never have experienced in Russia. Alongside his relationship with Jan and his erotic entanglements with other gay friends, he also craves anonymous sex.

Egorov quickly becomes a hugely successful pianist, performing in Carnegie Hall and recording albums at London's famous Abbey Road Studios. But he feels most at home in Amsterdam, where the level of musical talent is impressive and he treats the audiences at the Concertgebouw to many stunning performances. He practices intensely, sometimes for days on end, but often comments before a concert that he's hardly familiar with the piece. That makes some musicians nervous; they conclude he must be lazy and indifferent. But in fact he feels the need to understand a piece perfectly before performing it in public. No matter how much he prepares, he always thinks of how much more he could have done.

'The time has come. I have the disease.' After a concert in La Baule in 1987, Egorov announces that he is dying. In the 1980s, a diagnosis of AIDS is a death sentence. Egorov has become weaker, can no longer tolerate alcohol and drugs, and is clearly exhausted. He begins to lead a less demanding life, but his lost vitality will never return.

Egorov goes on performing until two months before his death. One of his last concerts is a recital in the Concertgebouw. At the age of 33, in his home on the Keizersgracht, he ends his life by drinking a lethal drug. Jan Brouwer and Tatiana are at his side as he sips his last glass of

port, smokes his last joint, and breathes his final breath. ‘It was seven in the evening, the exact time he had wanted to die. Just then, Tatiana remembered that Egorov had once told her he was born at seven in the evening, to the minute.’

The last two chapters form an epilogue about Egorov’s mother and his younger brother Andrushya. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, they leave Russia to start a new life in the Netherlands. His mother, Eleonora, dies of cancer soon afterwards, and Andrushya drowns his sorrows in a little room in Amsterdam after his wife has left him and his two children have returned to Russia. Brokken closes the novel with this observation: ‘I had walked this earth for more than fifty years and witnessed much of the twentieth century, but I could not compare myself to Andrushya, nor to Youri, Yelena, Eleonora, or Nikolai. History had never punished or tormented me. My freedom had never required me to sacrifice anything or anyone I loved.’

Structure of the book

The book is divided into eight sections with titles: ‘Diary of a Flight’, ‘Saint Petersburg on the Amstel’, ‘Back in the USSR’, ‘The Singing Divan’, ‘The Last Light’, ‘The Night without a Dawn’, and ‘A Russian Mother’. These are divided into a total of 33 numbered, untitled chapters. The number 33 refers to Youri Egorov’s age at his death in 1988. Within the chapters, Brokken leaps from anecdote to anecdote and from memory to memory. The story is not told in chronological order but does follow the narrative thread of Brokken and Egorov’s friendship from 1981 to 1988, into which many other storylines are interwoven.

Almost the entire story is told from Brokken’s perspective. One noteworthy exception is the second chapter, which is based on Egorov’s own written account of the first month after his defection. Brokken makes frequent use of dialogue to bring the character of Egorov to life and add momentum and immediacy. These dialogues are reconstructions, and although they are as accurate as Brokken could make them, he came up with the exact wording himself while writing the book. He also changed the names of some characters, because the people in question were still alive. For those reasons, and because of the book’s non-chronological structure, Brokken chose to describe it as a novel.

My rough estimate of the book's length is 110,000 words (378 pages). Hayo Deinum, the rights manager at the Dutch publisher Atlas Contact <hdeinum@atlascontact.nl>, should be able to provide a more accurate word count.

From the reviews

'An account of an intense seven-year friendship, described with engagement and integrity. This rich narrative must have grown out of an encounter between two Russian souls... The profound human affection between these two people, along with Egorov's talent and Brokken's great powers of empathy, have resulted in an extraordinary book.'

Jan Kuys, *Het Parool*

'In Jan Brokken's impressive body of work, this book is an artistic gem that stands out for both its serenity and its great power. You can read it as a recollection of Amsterdam in the eighties or as a reflection on the life of an artist. And between the lines, you can almost hear the music playing, and you feel compelled to go looking for recordings of Egorov's performances. But above all, *In the House of the Poet* is the enthralling, deeply human story of an exceptional friendship.'

Linde Roels, *De Leeswolf*

'Brokken calls this book a novel. I can see why. Friendships are not about facts but about dreams. This book is an act of affection, whose author is determined not to forget an important person and demonstrates the very best kind of understanding and compassion for the artist Egorov.'

Bas van der Putten, *De Groene Amsterdammer*

‘An uncommonly fascinating life story, a record of a place and time, a memoir of an intimate relationship, and the tale of a personal quest. Youri Egorov’s life was intense and gripping. Jan Brokken’s account of it is just as passionate.’

Lies Schut, *De Telegraaf*

‘Brokken’s unassuming approach is a great success. ... The pianist comes to life without any need for explanation. ... “There is a custom among Russian musicians of paying a final musical tribute when one of them dies,” Brokken writes. ... *In the House of the Poet* is an equally moving tribute.’

Bas Heijne, *NRC Handelsblad*

‘The fictional character of this book lies not in its presentation of the facts... but in its structure and style. ... As a novel strongly rooted in reality, this book is successful; as a biography, it is important because it paints a vivid portrait of its subject.’

Emanuel Overbeeke, *Biografie Bulletin*

‘An extraordinarily impressive tribute to one of the most fascinating pianists and one of the few artists who had the courage to escape the stranglehold of the Soviet Union.’

Kees de Leeuw, *Opus Klassiek*

But in the exiled poet's hideaway
Fear and the Muse take turns at watch.
Night enters at a rapid march
And does not know of any coming day.

Anna Akhmatova, *Voronezh*

PART ONE

Diary of a Flight

Three days before he died, he gave me twelve small sheets torn from a notebook. Thumb-worn pages dense with writing, splashed coffee, rings left by glasses and wine bottles, swipes of ink, and singe marks from smouldering cigarettes. His handwriting was small and neat, a little cramped at times, but aside from one or two passages where the words hid behind a soup of letters, the whole thing was legible. Not a phrase had been crossed out, not a word added. The lines were packed tight, the better to use every millimetre of paper.

‘For later,’ he said.

He was sitting on the sofa. Beams of sunlight slanted into the living room. By then, he could just barely tell light from dark and red from white. It was strange how good he looked, every bit as young as he was, with a winning smile that creased his cheeks. His hair had grown back far enough to cover his protruding ears; his skin had recovered the golden-brown tone that gave his face an Eastern glow. He had shaved by feel and pulled on a pair of flannel pants and the chessboard waistcoat he always liked to wear when friends came over for tea in the late afternoon. It was a Russian habit he was attached to – when tea was served, he never wanted to be alone.

Twelve sheets, preserved with care in a plastic folder. He slid it over the low table towards me. Then he stood and shuffled to the front room, where he had his piano, a Steinway from 1954, his year of birth, a concert piano with a full, rich sound.

He had not touched the keys in days. The hesitation that opens the piece sounded like his own hesitation. Never before had I heard him play it. Yet he performed it without one false note. After the first murmuring tones, the music flared up, from dark to dazzling, from dim to fiery. Although I could not see him, I was sure he had his eyes closed or was tipping his head back and staring at the ceiling. It was how he had always played, at least the pieces he knew by heart.

One moment I concentrated on listening, the next I let the pages glide through my hands. The Cyrillic script gave the words an angular look, as if carved in wood. Every passage ended with a line the full breadth of the page; the next began with a date on the left:

19 май 1976, 20 май, 21 май...

A diary.

I would soon learn that this was the diary he had kept in the spring of 1976, in the days after he fled the Soviet Union. He was taken to a camp for asylum seekers in a former abbey not far from Rome. He had told me about it: for thirteen days he'd been kept in solitary confinement, his sole company a pen, a pocket notebook he'd bought at the Moscow airport, a thermos of coffee each morning, and a bottle of red wine every night. He'd scrounged the wine from one of the carabinieri guarding him, a shy country boy who, to his amazement, had his mother's dark, deep-set eyes.

Fitful sounds filled the front room, and soon the whole house. The piece – Russian, no doubt – was just a few minutes long. The notes climbed higher and higher with countless trills, until they reached the highest C. And then it was over.

He sat down beside me again.

'Prokofiev?' I asked.

'Scriabin...'

He pointed at the sheets of paper. That is, in their general direction. In fact, he pointed at the bunch of white tulips on the coffee table. I was shocked; he was close to blind now. It was happening fast, frighteningly fast; two weeks earlier we had looked at photos together at his kitchen table. I half-rose from the couch as if to call for help, but as luck would have it, he couldn't see that either.

'Ask Tatiana for the translation,' he said, his voice soft and determined.

She was the only one of our friends who spoke and read Russian, with the ease of a woman born there. Tatiana was familiar with his handwriting; he had written her many letters,

while waiting in yet another noisy airport departure hall or seeking imaginary company to fend off boredom in yet another bleak hotel room. The letters were signed Youra, Yourka, Yourochka, Yourienka, or just plain Youri.

He had thought the whole thing through; the diary was for me, so that maybe I could use it later when I wrote about him... Tatiana, the translator he'd picked, was his oldest woman friend in the West, the daughter of Russian exiles who had found their way to the Low Countries many years ago, ending up in Brussels. Much the way he himself had fled to Amsterdam, with no real notion of what awaited him there, but with the firm intention of enjoying freedom to the fullest.

As he pointed at the tulips, I realized he was making his final arrangements. Physically, he could hold out a while longer; his appetite had returned, he was eating again and savouring his food. He was even drinking again; the evening before, we had polished off a bottle of wine together, decent Médoc wine I'd brought with me. But mentally, he was losing the battle. First his left eye had gone hazy, and now he was losing the light in his right eye too. He was wandering through a fog that grew thicker by the day; he could hardly make out the piano keys, and to him that was the worst punishment of all.

From outside came the familiar Amsterdam noises; the chugging of boats in the canal, the rustling of leaves, the dinging bells of the cyclists, the screeching wheels of the trams. 'Our city,' he had so often called it. And it was: he and I came from completely different landscapes, atmospheres, milieus, but we had both become part of this crazy town. It was the city that had offered us a home, a place to come back to in our wandering lives. And it was our city in another sense too. Without Amsterdam, we would never have got to know each other. Without Amsterdam, our friendship would never have existed.

Three weeks after his cremation I had my first chance to look at the typed translation. It brought him back to life for me: charming, funny, straight-talking, quirky, shy, and sometimes, from one moment to the next, desperate, obstinate, horrified, or vicious.

He had told me about his flight from Russia many times. I knew the backstory, I knew the context, but when I read his diary, he shared with me a loss that no success could never set right.

I too had fled, several times – first from home, then abroad. I knew what a powerful sensation it was to flee – that moment of hurtling from words into action, feeling the kilometres stretch away behind you, and thinking you could fly to the moon. I also knew that this euphoria went up in smoke the first time you looked into a pair of blank eyes in a foreign city staring back at you as if you were a raving loony.

That was as far as the similarity went. My escape had been no more than a departure; nothing prevented me from returning home. I came from a free country, where escape was never a life sentence. For him it had been an existential act. He had burned all his bridges; his father, mother, two brothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, and teachers were the living dead to him.

He'd had to do it. In Moscow, he felt hunted. The only boy he told his secret blabbed it all over the conservatory, then to musicians and artists around town. The city was full of informants in those days; they were everywhere, in the canteens and on the streets, in the bus, the metro, the parks, the university library, and the main hall of the conservatory. They picked up every whisper and passed on whatever was compromising, suspicious, or rebellious. In his coat pocket, he found anonymous notes; in the apartment block where he shared one-and-a-half rooms with his uncle and his mother, he received a phone call.

He and his mother had moved in with his Uncle Arik. Her decision had been final: you don't leave a child alone in Moscow. To his mother, his age scarcely mattered. Though he'd been an adult for years, she was certain that without her constant presence he would fail. Ever since his earliest childhood, she had seen him as more nervous, insecure, and vulnerable than his two brothers. To make sure he ate well, got enough sleep, and spent every free hour at the piano, she had quit her job in Kazan and moved to the capital with him.

She and Uncle Arik had tracked his every move, which made it twice as disturbing when someone banged on the door and shouted, 'Phone call for the boy.' No one ever called him at his home address, for the simple reason that he never gave out the number. It was too much fuss; you had to go down five flights of stairs to use the telephone in the central hall. The speaker didn't introduce himself. He heard a voice, a wheedling voice that said little and suggested volumes: 'I know what they say about you.'

He had always been careful, for fear of his mother, who was strict about everything, but also because he didn't want to spoil things for himself. He had almost completed his studies; the rest of his career would depend on the benevolence of the authorities. He could not permit himself one false move. But it was getting harder and harder to conceal his true nature. In a country like the Soviet Union, everyone was always putting on an act; no one could ever simply be himself. In his case, the act went very far; he had even changed the way he walked. He made sure to take large, heavy, ponderous steps, to march instead of scampering. It took incredible effort to ignore his own sense of rhythm. And the same was true of everything, really: his way of talking, the look in his eyes. He wished that just once he could say aloud that he was tired of pretending to be someone else, that a person born left-handed couldn't be condemned to use his right hand forever. and when the time came, he picked the wrong boy to confide in: a classmate at the conservatory, a pianist like him, with less talent. Envy leads to gossip; he should have known.

In the Soviet system, his preferences made him a psychiatric case. He lived in fear of banishment to a re-education camp in Siberia for two, four, or as long as eight years, or in the best case a miserable career as a pianist or music teacher in some remote region, in Alma-Ata or Tashkent. He was much too ambitious to put his future at risk, and anyway, even out in the sticks he would have to avoid the boys and men he could pick out of any crowd.

Maybe the idea of escape would not have dug its claws into him like a crab if he had spent his entire childhood in the Soviet Union. Growing up in Kazan, he'd pictured the whole world outside Russia as a wasteland. No other country in the world had the power, influence, and immeasurable vastness of his homeland, he told himself. In the words of Chekhov, 'Only migratory birds know where Russia ends.' He was convinced that no other world power could ever outshine Russia in justice, modernity, profundity, technology, or science, that Russian

music and Russian literature had reached unparalleled heights. He truly believed that if he left the Soviet Union he'd end up like Rachmaninoff, overcome with nostalgia, living backwards instead of forwards.

At the age of seventeen, he received permission to take part in the Marguerite Long–Jacques Thibaud Competition. At twenty-one, he went to Brussels for the Queen Elisabeth Competition. On those trips, he realized that his worldview was just an echo of what he had always been told – at school, on the radio and TV, and even at home. While it was true that outside Russia you couldn't smell the black soil in the air ('Russian soil smells different, and that's the kind of thing it's impossible to forget.' – Stravinsky), but you could see that the people were freer, more light-hearted, and had a better quality of life. The Dutch radio service invited him to play a Saturday matinee in Amsterdam's Concertgebouw. From that moment on, he knew that in the West his homosexuality wouldn't bother anyone – or at least, it wouldn't cost him his career. In Amsterdam he'd found the courage to walk like himself again.

Back in the Soviet Union, he became fed up with being led around in a harness like a toddler, of being told what music to play, what books to read, and what exhibitions to see. At the conservatory, he had studied a piece by Sofia Gubaidulina with his piano teacher, music that could never be performed on any stage. Gubaidulina had been branded 'decadent' and expelled from the composers' union. Schönberg, Boulez, and Stockhausen were just as unthinkable. Yefim Golyshev? Forbidden. Vladimir Rebikov? Forbidden. Golyshev had taken the very first steps in twelve-tone composition, six years *before* Schönberg. Rebikov had begun to experiment with tone clusters in 1912... He would never be allowed to perform their work in public, to share his sensitivity to the mathematics of their music, a gift he'd inherited from his mother. Before accompanying him to Moscow, she had taught maths at a secondary school.

He read musical scores, volumes of poetry, memoirs. Classics, mainly. The work of his contemporaries was hard to find; at best, it circulated in stencilled copies. He never missed a modern art exhibition, but it always turned out to be ideologically correct, conformist art, never pushing any limits. He'd had a secret plan to follow in the footsteps of Sviatoslav Richter, who collected contemporary art and held clandestine exhibitions in his home. But his visits to Richter's five-room apartment (by far the largest he'd ever seen in Moscow) mainly served to convince him that the pianist could permit himself so many liberties only because of his

worldwide fame. For some strange reason, the truth hadn't hid him until he was relieving himself at the toilet in the maestro's bathroom and his eye ran down the long row of aftershaves and colognes, all the most fashionable brands, and all souvenirs from the West. He and a couple of fellow students had broken the bottles open and helped themselves to the alcohol. A full day later, his breath had still reeked of Chanel No. 5.

Fame could be earned in a day, for example by winning a competition. It was harder to rise so high that they couldn't touch you. As Richter's career demonstrated, that took many years. And all that time, he would have to submit to the system. That was what he couldn't stand; since his earliest childhood, he'd had to give in to other people's wishes. He was six years old when his mother decided to turn him into a great pianist – even greater than his eldest brother, whom she'd also sat down at the piano at the same age. Nikolai would go far, would graduate from the Moscow Conservatory, but his mother knew he lacked the exceptional gifts of a prodigy. A couple of years later, she would send his youngest brother to the music school in Kazan, again in the hope that he would excel at the keyboard. But Andryusha had no interest in competing with his two brothers and swapped the piano for the violin. Of the three sons, it was Youri for whom his mother had the highest hopes. She saw him as the chosen one, a born pianist. She could tell enough from his posture at the piano, from the way he touched the keys. Her ear – a trained, cultivated ear – told her the rest. The outbreak of war had prevented her from continuing her piano studies; her girlhood dream had never become a reality. She expected him, and no one else, to make up for that.

When he was nine, his mother had placed him in the hands of Irina Dubinina; by the age of fourteen, he was sure he could never live without his piano instructor. Whenever he was asked a question, he had turned to her; if she shook her head, then he said 'no.' He couldn't take a single step without her. When he turned seventeen, Irina took him to Moscow and handed him over to the renowned piano teacher she herself had studied with at the Moscow Conservatory. He, Yakov Zak, the gentlest man on earth, had cared for him like a father.

He knew any of those people would have sacrificed their own careers for his, but they had filled in his life for him like an appointment book. While his mother watched over him in Moscow, his youngest brother was at home in Kaza, a thousand kilometres away, with his father

and his mother's youngest sister. Every time he thought of Andryusha, he felt ill at ease. Why did his brother have to make do with an aunt?

At twenty-two, he was ready to lead his own life. And at the same time, the thought was overwhelming. He had never taken care of himself; he was used to consulting his mother about every little worry. If he could, he would even have liked to talk to her about his plan for a new life in the West. But, thank God, he kept his mouth shut. There was no one she loved more than him, and for that very reason, she would have been capable of informing the security services of his plans – as a last resort, to keep him at home in the Soviet Union. The KGB knew her weaknesses – his too.

He would rather have waited another year before fleeing. Or a year and a bit, until he had made a name for himself in Moscow and Leningrad, given a few major concerts, and put out his first record. A budding career in the Soviet Union would ensure a warm welcome in the West, the kind accorded to Ashkenazy, Nureyev, Baryshnikov, and all the other musicians, dancers, writers, and chess players who had taken the Big Step. His plans were thrown into confusion by rumour-mongering.

The trip to Brescia, for an RAI concert on live TV, fell into his lap. It was organized at the last minute; he was replacing the great Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, who had suffered the half-death known as stage fright. On the flight, he was startled to see there was no official Soviet minder in the next seat. Only then did he tell himself that fate was presenting an opportunity, and that he would be an idiot not to seize it.

At the airport, he was supposed to be picked up by someone from the embassy – a KGB agent, no doubt. And again, fate smiled on him; the airplane landed too early. In the packed arrival hall, he slipped away; outside, he latched onto the first woman he saw. 'The nearest police station! To request political asylum! I beg you, please, please...' He made a helpless gesture, knowing his charm was like hot water on ice.

She asked him just one question: ‘What country are you from?’ In the car, she said, ‘Russia? You must be a pianist!’

He was stunned. ‘Is it written on my forehead?’

No, she told him. ‘On your fingers.’

It all happened fast, too fast for him to succumb to indecision or review the possibilities at leisure. The woman drove him as far as the station and gave him money for a one-way trip to Rome. Afraid he would be followed, he spent the entire journey on the toilet. In Rome, he went to police headquarters. During his interrogation, when asked about his ‘final destination,’ he wondered for the first time where he would go. What country? What city?

‘Amsterdam.’

In his third year at the conservatory, he had taken part in the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. After his performance, a man had come up to him and complimented him profusely on his interpretation of *La Campanella*. He worked for the Dutch radio. ‘If there’s ever any way I can help you,’ he’d said, ‘then call this telephone number in Amsterdam.’ The man had handed over a business card. His name was Hans; that was all he remembered, a German-sounding first name, Hans... and a last name that started with a K.

Since that night in the main auditorium of the Moscow Conservatory, he had always kept that card with him like a talisman, no matter what trousers he was wearing – in his wallet, in his back pocket, over his right buttock. As the man had given it to him, looking a little excited and nervous, like a conspirator, it had occurred to him that this slip of paper, not much bigger than a matchbox, might be his ticket to the West.

‘Contact person?’

‘Hans,’ he told them at the police station, fishing the business card out of his wallet. The brigadier on duty jotted down the details.

Less than an hour later he was locked up in a cell in a former abbey just outside Rome, close to God but far from his family.

19 May 1976

I applied for political asylum yesterday. It frightens me to imagine what will happen to my family. The thought is hard to bear. I've already had a few attacks of hysteria. I sometimes feel like taking my own life so that this all can end. This is the second day of my detention while I wait for Italian papers. I feel scared, lonely, and unhappy. 'Restless of heart' – I remember that phrase from Stefan Zweig. My God, forgive me and take pity on me. Give me perseverance and wisdom in my actions. I put all my hope in you now. Forgive me. We'll see what happens tomorrow. What should I do? I have written to everyone, including Mama, to ask for their understanding. What are things like now for her, for my brothers, for Uncle Arik? I don't know what will happen to them. I am going to sleep with a heavy heart. Forgive me, my God.

20 May

A miserable day. I am alone, but there's a police officer sitting or standing at my door the whole time. The policemen do not speak a word of English. Tonight I was taken to see their chief. He said that members of the Soviet consulate want to visit me. I refused. I will send a letter to the consulate to ask them to leave my family alone. They're all I can think of. I feel like crying. Maybe wine will help me to forget. No, I have to work and become a great pianist. Work!!!

21 May

I was interrogated at length today, and didn't care for it. They asked for the addresses of all my friends. They must have been intelligence officers. I didn't name a single name. Today is the day I was supposed to return to Moscow. I wonder what's going on there. It must be a hard time for Mama. I feel terrible, really terrible. Reading the Bible calms me a little. A brilliant book. When will I receive my Italian papers? Soon, I hope. How is Andryusha? When I thought of his poems yesterday, it made me cry. My sweet little brother... And my older brother, Nikolai... I think Nikita sensed that something beyond repair was about to happen. He was so sad when he said goodbye to me: he wrapped his arms around me and wouldn't let go. Once I get to Amsterdam, I have to travel on to Brussels quickly to earn money. And then to India. I'll write letters to Shura and Mitya. My escape must have caused a huge scandal there. Meanwhile, I have a police officer on my hands here. Not the nice one from yesterday and the day before, but a sadist, a jackass. He is bald, he is twenty-one years old, and he looks like an old goat. I feel like a beggar. The humiliation of it all!

22 May

When will they let me leave? I can't stand this anymore. What a dreadful situation. I had a little wine today; that did me good. On Monday I will go to Rome to speak to someone from the Soviet consulate. Yes, sir, I'm ready to go back! I'm sick of this place, can't stand it any more.

23 May

Fifth day of detention. All my thoughts are of Mama and of my family. I am a worthless wretch. Psalm 22: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Take me to Rome, now! Please, sir, I want to go home, I'm frightened.

24 May

Sixth day of detention, the same as ever. What can I do? I don't know. What will happen tomorrow? I don't know. I know nothing. Rome, Rome! Mama, Papa, Andryusha, darling Nina, Uncle Arik, Nikisha! Now I know what it is to suffer!

25 May

What an ordeal. I have to spend another week here. They told me today. My God, why are you punishing me this way? And what about my family? How is it going for them? Very badly indeed, I have no doubt. The people I love! Soon I will go to Holland, in ten or fifteen days.

26 May

More of the same. I sent a letter home. I'm so confused. That bald bastard is here again. Filthy swine! He's as drunk as a dog. My God! I've run out of cigarettes and don't dare ask for more. Ecclesiastes, that's the best part of the Old Testament. 'Vanity of vanities' – so moving, and at the same time so sad and bitter.

27 May

My God, the tenth day is already coming to an end. Time creeps by here, and they won't let me go to Rome until Wednesday. Tomorrow is my birthday. Twenty-three, not so old yet. Tomorrow I'll see someone from the foreign ministry. I don't know what will happen yet. Long live freedom. I will work and give two concerts to earn some money, just enough to go to India. Maybe Hans K. can help me.¹ O God, be with me now, protect my loved ones, I beg you. Help my family and give them strength. I'll submit to anything if only they'll leave my mother, my father, my brothers, and Uncle Arik alone. Can You hear me, God? Please listen.

28 May

¹ Hans Kerkhoff, head of classical music for the Dutch broadcasting network VARA.

My birthday – the first in such a macabre setting. I spoke to two officials from the embassy. They want me to return home; I refused. I can imagine what will happen if I say yes: I'll be sent into exile at once. I received a letter from my mother. Dearest Mama, I love you, now more than ever after reading your letter. Please, please don't be so hurt by what I've done to you. I'm the scum of the earth, but I love you, I adore you. My God, why is my family being punished this way? I'm sure I'll end up going back home in a year. Whatever happens, they will send me into exile, they will lock me away in prison, and they will beat me. I won't be able to bear it. Two years at most, and then I'll go back. I swear. O God, accept this pledge from Your humble servant. I swear that before two years have passed I'll return home. Rescue me, my God! I will be twenty-four years old when I return and see my family again. Help me, God, and I will worship You my whole life long. I have to spend four more days here, and I've been here for ten days already.

29 May

And now the eleventh day has passed. And nothing has changed. Well, except that I had a lot to drink today. It's all right, I'm not an alcoholic. It just helped the day go by faster than usual. I constantly think of my family, of Mama's letter. I'll return home; that's for certain. Maybe the decision will haunt me for the rest of my days, but I'm determined to go back. I hope they'll still be waiting for me at home. I've been asking for envelopes for five days, but they haven't given me one. I have to wait another three days and four nights here. My God, help me. Grant me peace, and I will praise Your name. Praised be the Lord!

30 May

Twelfth day of my detention. Tomorrow they'll take photos for my passport. I can't stop thinking about my letter to the embassy – what am I supposed to write? I think of my family so much that my head's exploding. I cry at night and find no rest by day. Still, I've done the best thing I could do for them – one day it will make more sense to them. It would all have come out

sooner or later anyway, and then things would have been a hundred times worse. For me and for them. O God, rescue me.

31 May

It is six p.m., eight p.m. in Moscow. They'll bring me dinner soon. My passport photos haven't been taken yet, I'm not sure why. I feel awful and spend the whole time thinking about how my family is suffering and it's all my fault. I can't be certain of anything anymore. I make plans, but I see no way out. Where do I start? And how? I have no idea. I'm penniless, and you have to pay for everything. I have to go to Amsterdam soon, and I have no money. How am I supposed to get some? Maybe Afanasyev can send me a little? I'm sure Afonya would do it. They've just brought me 2,500 lire. Funny. I think about money and they bring me some! Is that how it's going to work from now on in the West? I'll drink tonight, that will cheer me up. Maybe tomorrow will be a better day and they'll let me go to Rome. Another day and two more nights here. Bless me, God.

1 June

I still know nothing. They've given me my identity papers, but I still don't know when I can go to Rome. I have to ask the director. I believe I must be at the end of my tether now. I think of my family all the time. I will return, I will definitely return. For the past two days I've been lighting a fire here every evening and thinking of Scriabin's *Vers la flamme*. I want to play that piece. I want to learn it by heart, note for note, and never forget it. And I will play it when I am desperate. 'Toward the flame.' God, grant your me blessing.

2 June

The marshal never showed up.² Neither did the bloody director, where's he hiding out? I've been here for fifteen days now. I feel like bursting into tears. There's a storm outside. Mother dear, I long to hold you in my arms. I wish I could see everyone again.

3 June

Today there are five photos of me in the fascist magazine *Il Tempo* and a long article about me. My God, they will kill me here, they will murder me. Tomorrow I go to Rome. Today they finally took photos for my passport. O God, protect me from my enemies and give me strength.

4 June

They are toying with me. No decision until next week. I have to stay here and wait for it until Monday. Wait and drink wine – the best way to wait. When I drink, time flies. I called Zhenya P. today,³ and I wish I could sleep with him. He's such a kind man. Sasha will be here soon, in August.⁴ Then I'll come back to Italy to see him. He's my friend, and besides, he's a Russian. It's such a comfort to speak Russian here in the West. As I write, a police officer is leaning over me, trying to figure out what I'm writing. What a nightmare. I've opened my second bottle of wine; that's why my handwriting is so hard to read. God help me. I have to get to Rome quickly. I like the policeman's looks. He's a country boy, with those dark Italian eyes. Wish I could go to bed with him. I'm sorry, God, forget you ever heard that.

Saturday 5 June

I've been locked up here for eighteen days now. It's been raining all day, I haven't been outside for a second. Sometimes they let me get a little fresh air. I have two small rooms here, one to sleep in and one for the daytime, plus a kitchenette and a toilet with a shower. A knock on the

² The Russian word for 'marshal' is also an insult, literally meaning 'syphilis patient.'

³ Evgeny (Eugene) Polyakov, a Russian dancer who had fled to Venice.

⁴ Aleksandr Sumerkin, a writer and a friend of Youri's from Moscow.

door – two bottles of wine for me. My goodness. I've become quite a drinker here; my evening will go by quickly now. Strange how drinking makes you forget everything. My God, protect me from turning into a drunkard.

Sunday 5 June⁵

Or is it already Monday? Or was it still Saturday? I'm no longer certain. I played cards, I slept, I took a shower, I ate. I thought of my family, and I had a terrible dream. The nineteenth or twentieth day has passed.

Monday 6 June

I will go mad. Stark raving mad. Here in the West, I will be all alone. I don't know anyone here. In Amsterdam, I will be alone. It's incredibly hard to find someone to share your life with, that much I've learned. The twentieth day has passed. Help me, God.

Tuesday 7 June

I cried again, I have another headache, I reread the Book of Ecclesiastes, I played cards, had dinner, drank, smoked. I received a letter from an Italian woman who saw my picture in *Il Tempo*. She offers me a place to stay, a room, a bed, and she wants to marry me. I have been here for three weeks today. I dreamt about my family, a most unpleasant dream. My God, rescue me. No one else is suffering as I am. Do you hear me, God? Bloody hell.

Wednesday 8 June

⁵ From here to 8 June, the dates are incorrect.

Another day has passed. I refuse to eat. I've gone on hunger strike. Maybe this way they'll give me a passport tomorrow. Every night I dream of my family. I can't stand it anymore. My God, help me.

Thursday 10 June

H⁶

Friday 11 June

I finally received my passport. I will go to Rome on Monday or Tuesday and then travel on to Amsterdam or Brussels. I had a horrible dream last night, a dream about Mama. They're going to kill me, I just know it. That's my impression. I feel like going to Kazan to see my family. I have nobody here, I am all alone. Where can I play piano, what am I supposed to play, what I am I supposed to do, where am I supposed to live, and on what, and with whom? How difficult everything is! My God, if my family knew how I am suffering. My heart can no longer take it. My God, help me.

Saturday 12 June

The twenty-fifth day. How it pains me to think of my family. Soon, very soon, I will be free. I'm not sure how much I'll really like that. On Monday or Tuesday I will be free. I have to call Afonya to ask him for money. Maybe he'll help me. O God, make him help me. How good it would feel to be at home now, how happy I'd be with everyone around me. My God, give me strength and rescue me.

Sunday 13 June

⁶ Illegible. Possibly 'hunger'.

I am full of anticipation. I pray to God, asking him to make them release me tomorrow. Who could have believed it would take so long. Rescue me, my God.

Monday 14 June

I still haven't left. I don't understand why it's taking so long. I've called Zhenya. No money. I fear I will have to work very hard. Forgive me, God.

Tuesday 15 June

It is 2:30. I am on my way to Rome. This afternoon they will put me on the flight to Amsterdam. I hardly dare believe it.

He was starting to feel almost like a real Amsterdammer – he'd bought a bicycle, a large, black, stately bicycle, and he'd smoked his first joint, right out in the street where everyone could see – when his Dutch impresario urgently recommended that he sign up for the Cliburn International Piano Competition in Fort Worth. It would be the quickest way for him to establish a reputation in the United States. Whoever won the Cliburn was guaranteed a performance in New York's temple of music, Carnegie Hall and 'if you make it there, you'll make it anywhere.' His impresario practically burst into song.

To him, competitions were a form of self-imposed torture. At the Tchaikovsky, Elisabeth, and Marguerite Long/Jacques Thibaud Competitions, he had reached the finals with ease, but then his nerves had kept him from giving his all. Another problem was his musical style; he felt nothing but contempt for polished, glittering interpretations that were hollow inside. Instead, he took risks, emphasizing the angular contours of a piece and occasionally striking a wrong note.

At a competition, you had to be made of steel, not flesh and blood. Or else you had to know that your life was at stake. his teacher – Yakov Zak, a Jew – had realized that in 1937 when he took part in the Chopin Competition in Warsaw. Zak, still young then, had known his life would end in Siberia if he didn't make the front page of *Pravda* by winning first prize. Stalin's antisemitic campaign was swelling to unprecedented proportions, and the only escape route was outstanding achievement in science or the arts. Night after night, black KGB cars stalked the streets of Moscow, picking people up. Not one street, not one housing block was spared from the arrests. Jewish men and women would pack food and flannel underwear before going to bed, just in case it was their turn that night. Chopin's chromatic Etude, Op. 10, No. 2, which Zak performed in a trance, was the only thing that kept him from the grave.

Not as much was at stake for Youri. His future, yes, but that prospect was a little too vague to feel like hot breath on his neck. At the Tchaikovsky Competition, he had taken third

place; at the Elisabeth Competition, third place again; and at the Marguerite Long/Jacques Thibaud Competition, fourth.

‘And at the Cliburn, you’ll come in first,’ his impresario predicted.

But he wasn’t so sure. There were three Soviet pianists on the jury. Amid the grand rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union in every field of endeavour, the two superpowers courteously took it in turns to rake in all the honours in the music world, excluding smaller countries from their power games. When Bartók arrived in New York, no one extended a helping hand; he came from Hungary. Two years later in that same city, Shostakovich commanded universal admiration. For him – the best-known enemy composer, the man who had written the score for Soviet life – the Americans bowed down in homage.

In Fort Worth, in the heart of Texas, it would be no different: a Soviet pianist would win first prize, or if not, then victory would go to an American. That kind of intrigue went over the head of Youri’s impresario, a down-to-earth Dutchman accustomed to fairness and justice. Nor could the man see through the glitter and glamour of classical music in the United States. It was yet another difference in culture and mentality: when you come from a small country, you’re quicker to be dazzled by power and grandeur. The information packet the organization sent Youri in advance started with a list of the cocktail parties hosted by the sponsors. The pieces to be performed were in the appendix.

He considered cancelling the trip to Texas, and his impresario’s efforts to change his mind didn’t help. He told Youri that Harvey Lavan (‘Van’) Cliburn, who had mostly retired from performing but was still the greatest pianist America had ever produced, would head the jury, and added, ‘That fellow’s the biggest poof on earth. He’ll be drooling over you.’

If you wanted to send Youri into a rage, all it took was a crude remark like that. He was disgusted; if Cliburn was going to fall for anything, it had better be his skill at the piano! The evening he’d been summoned to the telephone in Uncle Arik’s apartment block, he had made a resolution to live with honour – to be honourable in his conduct, his thoughts, and his soul. Not for a moment would he lower himself to cheap opportunism or consider flirting for personal gain.

He looked forward to meeting Van Cliburn, but for a different reason. The pianist had been a shining example to many young Russians. In 1958, Van Cliburn had won the first Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow with his interpretation of Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concert and Tchaikovsky's first. In a phone call with Khrushchev, the jury chairman had asked whether they had permission to award first prize to the American. And wonder of wonders, the Soviet leader had decided that, a year after the launch of the first Sputnik, the Soviet Union had a big enough lead to acknowledge that the American really was the best. 'Go ahead and give him the prize.' A triumphant tour of the Soviet Union followed; in every city the Texan pianist visited, he was showered with bouquets for the grand, romantic freedom of his musical style, and above all for being the first Western musician to perform behind the Iron Curtain. He gave his audiences hope of greater political openness. Cliburn had become the symbol of a new, still-confused dream of freedom. Even when tensions rose between East and West again in the 1960s, Cliburn went on performing in the Soviet Union, and his concerts inspired such intense emotions that he often could not even leave the stage until midnight. In Moscow, the American was cheered by delirious crowds; outside the concert hall, he was lifted onto the hands of his adoring fans and then overloaded with gifts. Soviet music lovers clipped photos of Cliburn from magazines and newspapers and put them up on their walls. He was the incarnation of freedom, the modern world, America; his boyish appearance befitted the countryman of James Dean and Elvis Presley. All this was why Yuri looked forward to shaking Van Cliburn's hand in Fort Worth.

The competition had another attractive feature: the required programme. From the chosen repertoire, Yuri could select Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue (BWV 903), Mozart's Fantasia in C Minor (KV 475), and Schumann's Fantasia in C Major, pieces he had studied in Moscow and knew so intimately that he sometimes played them in the middle of the night, when some paranoid fantasy was keeping him awake and he went to the piano to rest his mind. They were compositions he understood, and he could never perform a piece until he had fathomed the logic behind every note. For that reason, his repertoire was still fairly small; the Cliburn Competition's required programme looked to him like a stroke of luck.

He decided to go.

The trip was a disaster; he flew into Heathrow when his plane to Texas was departing from Gatwick (the impresario's mistake), wasn't allowed to leave the airport because he didn't have a visa for the United Kingdom, had to beg and plead with the border police to let him make the transfer, and was eventually given the papers he needed and bundled into a taxi to Gatwick, where the delay made him miss his plane. He had to wait four hours for the next one, and when he finally arrived in Fort Worth, his suitcase was missing.

In a borrowed dinner jacket, he was taken to a cocktail party where he shook Cliburn's hand. Then, after hurriedly buying a T-shirt, he gave three interviews to TV reporters whose only question was why he'd left the Soviet Union. The shirt was too tight and made him uncomfortable. Maybe that explains his reply to the ABC reporter who asked, 'What do you think of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan?'

'Bad,' he said, which was a tolerable start, but then he added, 'isn't it?'. He despised journalists and wondered if freedom was anything more than a game of cat-and-mouse. It seemed they expected him to meekly play his part, to conform to their expectations. But by the time a second journalist asked the same question – 'Your opinion about the invasion of Afghanistan' – he had come up with a wittier response: 'Was that in major or minor?'

He didn't stay in a hotel; his hosts, the Smith family, were among the competition's sponsors. That was another reason he would rather not have competed; he felt he was getting too old to be hosted by a family like a little boy. Not only was Mr Smith fabulously wealthy (he owned 10 per cent of the shares in Texas Oil), but he also acted the part.

The outdoor temperature was 40° C (104° F), but Smith had turned up the air conditioner so high that inside the house it was 15° C (59° F) and he could light the fireplace. 'You're a Russian, right?' he asked Youri. 'So you must love the sound of crackling wood.' The swimming pool in the garden was Olympic sized with a glass partition in the middle; on one side you could go for a dip, and on the other side sharks were swimming to give the impression of a tropical sea. Youri, playing the innocent, asked Mrs Smith, 'Is this what they call decadence?'

He made it through the preliminary rounds and began preparing for the semifinals, this time in his own dinner jacket – the suitcase had finally arrived. The familiar length of the sleeves

was enough to put him a little more at ease. Then something happened that he knew would haunt him for the rest of his life.

In the semifinal round, he was the fourth to perform. The first three performances were followed by a brief intermission. He was waiting in the wings. The members of the jury were there too, including the Soviet pianist Andrey Petrov, a cunning old fox in a rumpled grey suit. The gong sounded. Just before he went on stage, Petrov whispered into his ear, ‘Did you hear Yakov Zak died? Heart failure. Your fault. Your fault.’

The insinuation that his defection to the West had caused the death of his teacher Yakov Zak hit him like a sledgehammer. In a thick fog, he wandered onto the stage.

He played neither for the audience nor for the jury. He played with passion, utter passion, as if Yakov Zak were sitting next to him again, and he could hear his teacher’s voice, ‘Go on, put your whole self into it. They can all go to hell. You make music.’ That had been his constant advice: Yourochka, don’t worry about one mistake more or less, make music!

The jury unanimously excluded him from the final round. That included the chairman, who didn’t have the guts to stand up for a Russian in exile. Cliburn had become convinced that he was the narrow bridge between East and West and wouldn’t do anything to endanger that position. He wanted to die an apostle of peace and never missed a reception at the Soviet embassy. Political motives mattered more to him than music; in truth, he had become more of a diplomat than an artist, a pawn in the complex relations between East and West.

The audience was outraged. The Smiths started a collection for him then and there, raising ten thousand dollars, the exact amount that would be received by the first-place winner. The New York impresario Maxim Gershunoff also offered him a series of concerts in the United States, starting with a recital in Alice Tully Hall at the Lincoln Center in New York, followed by a performance four months later in Chicago, and culminating, at year’s end, in a recital in Carnegie Hall.

None of it penetrated the fog. For days, he heard the echoes in his head: ‘Zak... Zak... Zak... I killed Yakob Zak.’

He flew to New York to perform in Alice Tully Hall: standing ovations, a collective cry of ‘bravo’! It was as if the reviewers were trying to outdo each other in their praise: ‘The greatest piano recital I’ve ever heard’ (Bill Zakariassen in the *Daily News*), ‘The whole performance was remarkable’ (John Rockwell in *The New York Times*), ‘One of the most thrilling piano recitals I can remember’ (Speight Jenkins in the *New York Post*), and ‘The biggest and most poetical young pianistic talent I have ever encountered’ (Andrew Porter, *The New Yorker*).

He swept the newspaper clippings into a heap and held the flame of his lighter to them.

Zak. He had killed Zak.

Another party packed with VIPs, another cartload of caviar, and a river of champagne to toast his success. Gershunoff flung his arms around him: ‘You’ve made it, you’ve made it... I declare you my son, the apple of my eye, the new Horowitz. I’ll get you bookings in every goddamn city in the United States.’ A pile of invitations soon followed, but Youri turned them all down, even the handwritten one from Vladimir Horowitz.

He was yearning for his house on the canal. As soon as he could, he wanted to get back to Amsterdam.