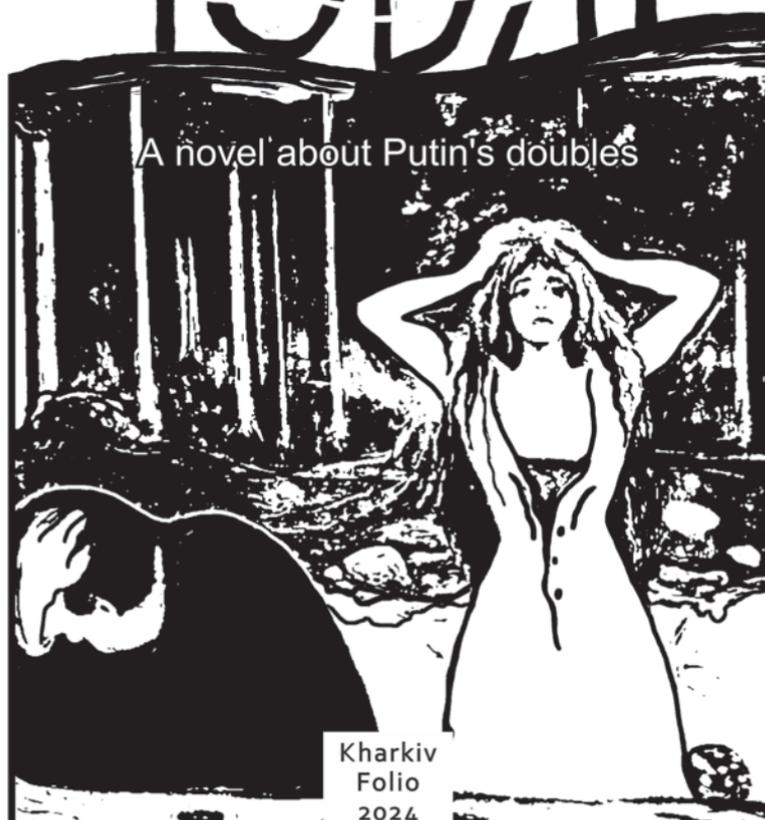


Oleksandr Krasovytskyy

TODAY

A novel about Putin's doubles



Kharkiv
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CHAPTER 1

January 10, 2020. Saint Petersburg.

ULYANA

“Today! Mom, I want to live today! He was already President when I was born! I am twenty, and he’s still the President! I feel ashamed when I win in competitions and our flag is raised! Mom, I am ashamed that my country is ruled by bloody Soviet narrow-minded idiots! I don’t want to wait for Putin to die! I don’t want to think that the next one will be even worse! Every day I think about the Ukrainian girls who lost their homes, that my neighbor was drafted into the army and he will shoot at people—Ukrainians, Georgians, and Syrians! I have to go to Holmenkollen tomorrow, but I don’t want to, I’m ashamed, even though I didn’t do anything bad to these people!”

“Ulyana, please calm down!” Mom, as always, didn’t understand how much it hurt me. “My father, your grandfather, grew up in exile in Kazakhstan, and did not remember his father due to the fact that your great-grandfather, who went through the war, considered it



possible to speak something like you do. Therefore, what's the use of him taking the Reichstag, if already in 1948 he was shot, and his grandmother was sent to a camp near Karaganda? In our country, you cannot have your own opinion. Moreover, you should think about your sisters if you don't care about your own life."

"Mom, I would have stayed somewhere in Europe long ago after the competition if it weren't for you and my sisters. Don't you understand that by working at the university, you are helping the authorities to zombify students that the history you teach does not exist? I usually remain silent when girls from Europe and America ask me about my country. However, I cannot remain silent when my friends from Ukraine openly say what they think about the Russians. I don't want to have anything to do with these scums in power, but I was born in the same country as them."

Of course, I shouldn't have lost my temper. Moreover, it wasn't for the first time. Then there were my mother's tears; the sisters came running to calm her down. Then my mother again remembered my father; again, she said that it was he who raised me as a wolf cub—two historians in one family are too much, and the father shouldn't have imposed his view of life on the child.

I loved my father very much. I was not with him when he walked along Nevsky Avenue on that ill-fated winter evening. He decided to make a remark to the black-hundredists* who were gathering in Catherine Park near Alexandrinsky Theater. He was beaten with baseball bats and left to die in the cold, unconscious. The police only

* Chernosotentsy. Ultra-nationalist activists in Russia.

noticed the body in the morning. Of course, no one was charged. Since then, my mother has finally taken the side of the authorities, she has one argument—our girls. The twins are sixteen, grown-up girls, and they should already be thinking with their heads. Hopefully, when they get older the whole family will move some place far away.

January 14, 2020. Crimea.

Territory of Ukraine occupied by the Russian Federation.

Yalta. Livadia. Lower Oreanda summerhouse.

YURI

I am a double. The First Person's double. The double of the most guarded man in the world. My whole life is his life. I am 55. I won't say that life is good. On the day when I was taken to St. Petersburg, my life was practically zero. I lost my job, my wife left me. I had no children, brothers or sisters; my parents died. Friends? Yes, there was someone to drink with, someone to complain about life to. In addition, there were even those who were ready to help me. I spent the last months before "takeoff" literally on the sidewalk. I made money with my "patriotic" position. I shouted out when necessary and carried placards. I supported the authorities. I even started to like it. It is just cold outside all the time. My build is not heroic, my height is much to desire, my lungs are weak; so all the time I have to "warm up" myself from the inside. I couldn't stand it for long "on the state pavement," as my friend Mykyta says. He was probably named after Mykyta Khrushchev. And, I was named in honor of Yuri Gagarin. Nevertheless,



I must forget my name. I am now Vladimir Vladimirovich. Sergei Vladilenovich said that my life depends only on how ready I am to be Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin], and not Yuri Chervyakov from St. Petersburg.

It was very cold that day. Well, of course, the guys and I started warming up from the very beginning of the shift. And, of course, we bullied passers-by.

At first, there were Tajiks, but there were five of them, and they immediately broke out. Then, in the evening, when I was already too drunk, there came those two guys with sidelocks. Such a great target for hunting. But then that guy came running unfortunately. In addition, we were tired; in this condition we could no way hold the bat. He would have put us all onto the snow if I had not had a knife. We parted ways later, and the snow began to fall, so much so that I thought we would pass it off luckily. Nevertheless, no way—they came to pick me up at home in the morning. I was still rather senseless when they started beating me—so I immediately laid out everything, and took it all upon myself so that there would be no group crime charge. In short, I was waiting for a week in the pre-trial detention center for some unknown reason, but then I was called for a medical examination. Height, weight, ears were measured, chronic diseases, and a probe was inserted into the stomach, even into the anus. They asked all sorts of bad questions about my sex life. Moreover, they took me away with a bag over my head. As I understand it now, they took me to Novo-Ogaryovo. And again, the medical examination, again questions. But in a polite manner—they didn't beat me anymore. I carefully asked if they had confused me with someone. And they just laughed.

CHAPTER 2

February 7, 2020. Saint Petersburg.

ULYANA



My name is Ulyana Karmalyuk. Yes, it was actually “Karma” that they called me both in high school and at university. I did not follow in the footsteps of my parents to the School of History; I study at the School of Physics. Well, I’m kind of “studying” ... When there are no sport training camps or competitions, I try to understand something. I’m not the worst student, but I need a diploma for the sake of my mother, not for my future career. Since childhood, my dad and I soldered, bought and connected microcircuits, we even made our own mobile phone. However, with my choice of profession, I, of course, upset my father, but pleased my mother. My sisters, Lera and Vera, generally want to study to become actresses, and you might think they are welcome there. I think they still have time to change their choice and find something calmer.

God has been generous in giving beauty to all of us, but why use it as an addition to choose any career at all?

Still, the main thing in my life is sport. When in my first year I discovered that I was talented in biathlon, it was a surprise to me. I was fascinated by everything—shooting, summer tournaments with roller skating, trips to the north to the “kingdom of permafrost.” This is my fourth year in biathlon, and I compete on equal terms with girls who have been doing it since school. If it were not for the moral side of being on our national team, one could actually consider that life was a success. Yet there are things like either doping scandals, or offers from coaches and team doctors to “get some medical treatment,” or sidelong glances and grins of rivals from other countries before taking doping control—these things do offend and make one nervous. It doesn’t matter. I’d rather quit the sport than be charging myself with some kind of chemicals and trading one moment of glory for a lifetime of shame. I have my study and I like it too. It is very good that in physics the laws are objective and you do not need to pay attention to constantly changing facts like in history.

Today we have the Youth Cup stage in Germany. I woke up in a great mood, and even evening conversations on the phone with my mother could not spoil it. She speaks like an old woman, constantly recalling the Stalinist times, which she did not live through. Well, what parallels could there be? The world has changed. And if Russia lags behind world progress, it will not be able to stop progress in other countries by force of arms. We need to change ourselves! And I’m ready to be different. Mom says that since her roots are from Kuban area, and I have her last name (sorry, dad, but at the age of 16 I made a choice not

in favor of your last name—Petrov is a dime a dozen, and Karmalyuk is something special), we are descendants of Ukrainians. In addition, the language of her childhood was similar to Ukrainian, and so were the songs and even cuisine—dumplings, porridge with cracklings, and lard. And she tells me not to mention too much about this to anyone. Well, as if no one could see the last name, just think about it. My last name is cool, vibrant, and I will make it glorious!

February 9, 2020. Old Square, Moscow.

ANNA

My name is Anna Krastoshevskaya, I am thirty... Five? Six? Yes, I am thirty-six, and, of course, no one will give me these years.

I am short, very thin, and black-haired; no one has seen my gray hair, everyone around me likes my style of clothing and makeup. The girls are probably jealous. I have a great job, highly paid and not very dusty—a personal assistant to a major official. One of those who skillfully hides his intelligence, his education and knows how not to stick out too much from the gray crowd. Thanks to a good salary, and periodic envelopes “for pins”, I have everything that a girl from an old Moscow intelligent family could dream of—a good apartment in a new building in a quiet center on Bolshaya Bronnaya Street, a large “man’s” jeep, which I can’t live without. And, I cannot imagine myself without vacationing twice a year in the most expensive places in the world, shopping, yoga, and everything I can



think of for my money, if I find time for it. Everyone is sure that I will not marry a second time, because I am secretly or openly in love with my boss, and I skillfully maintain such confidence. It's unlikely that anyone understands that no one knows the real him like I do. I have been with him for more than five years, and for a long time now the main thing in my attitude towards him has been disgust and detestation. I am generally squeamish, but my aversion to snakes and spiders doesn't stop me from watching films about them on Animal Planet. And I certainly wouldn't trade my job for any other. I made my choice. I am my favorite person, and work is only part of my self-affirmation. No matter how many compliments they give to my systematic approach, methodical approach, and dedication to my work, they will never know my true attitude towards all this.

Today the boss is on a business trip to Crimea, where he is going to have some other meaningless meetings in a row waiting for him. I drew up an agenda and a list of participants for him; but as for me I'll make it a day earlier and I'll still have time to attend a performance in Lenkom Theater along with my friend.

February 11, 2020. Special purpose object, Gelendzhik.

ALEXEI

My name is Alexei Gagloev. I am Ossetian. To be more precise, I am half Ossetian, and my native language is Russian. I am sixty-three. I would like to say that I am a physicist—I was a researcher at the Research Institute of



Radiophysics and a lecturer at St. Petersburg University for almost forty years, but life is such a thing ...

I am the President. No, I'm not out of my mind. I am the President of the Russian Federation. I receive delegations, cut ribbons, and sit in the Presidiums. Sometimes I fly out on foreign visits. Once I had to negotiate with Erdogan himself. I'm used to drinking with Lukashenko, calling Rakhmon and Pashinyan via video conference, and even receiving delegations of senators. Usually all this happens nearby, in Sochi. Twice I was called to perform my functions in Moscow. For some reason, it is generally accepted that if you have North Caucasian roots, then you should worship Kadyrov and admire him. Really, I, a Doctor of Physics and Mathematics (for whom the words "plasma physics" is a term and not a curse), should admire a man who never emerged from the Middle Ages? If it weren't for the terrible story with my son, I, of course, would never have changed my profession. But I had no choice. I live someone else's life, this life is sometimes even interesting for a person who is accustomed, in general, to intellectual work, to scientific experiments, but my former life was much closer to me. Five years ago, my son got into trouble. A lot of money that was circulating in his real estate business ... unexpectedly planted drugs ... threats ... And suddenly, an insinuating man with a quiet voice who offered to "settle everything" and also give a guaranteed roof for new projects, which would make my son a millionaire. A deal with the devil, because to save my son I had to disappear. No, nothing threatened me except loss of face, not in a figurative sense, but in the very real sense, and a funeral. A real funeral, which I looked at from

the window of an armored Mercedes, my funeral. I had no way to warn my wife and son. For everyone, I became a victim of the explosion on Nevsky Avenue, in which people died. I hope that these victims were not connected with creating a “clean” death story for me, that I was simply added to the list of victims. However, these people can and do everything. I became a puppet. Everything must be called by its proper name. I am a doll.

I have a master—a quiet, intelligent, almost invisible man who is building his own doll empire. I don’t know what will happen next. They will probably kill me when my avatar, the one I (I think, successfully) plays in this theater, dies (or is killed).

I have a lot of free time. Two palaces and many servants. Sometimes. And so ... They keep him locked up for weeks until the Real One arrives. Then my time comes. Therefore, I am a man without a face. A person who is guarded only so that no one sees him. I lay back in my windowless basement and read books, watch TV, and exercise. But I don’t see people. I get my food, clothes, everything I might need in the elevator, which descends to my bunker from the first floor. Is this life? I had no choice. The quiet man organized everything well.

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