

# THE RAT-KILLER

ALMA BOOKS LTD  
London House  
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[www.almabooks.com](http://www.almabooks.com)

*The Rat-killer* first published in Russian as *Krysovoi* in 1997

This revised version first published in English by Alma Books Ltd by in 2008

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English translation © Alma Books Limited, 2008

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Printed in Great Britain by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

ISBN: 978-1-84688-053-7

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# THE RAT-KILLER

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ALMA BOOKS



*“Svetloyar is a small lake in the woods of the Nizhny Novgorod region. According to an old folk legend, the town of Kitezh resisted the invasion of Batu Khan by submerging itself under the lake. In the popular imagination, Kitezh has remained unchanged underwater, with all its houses, churches and people intact. And if you are pure of heart, you will get a message from Kitezh: you will see at the lake’s bottom the church domes, and hear its bells ringing, but the sinners will see Kitezh as just woods and wasteland, and this will continue until the end of times, until the second coming.”*

From an old guide book



# 1

## *Two Toilets for Two Branches of Power*

16 Days to D-Day – 27th August 1992, Early Morning

“Been slobbering into your pillow, have you?” I’d woken Oldie up with my telephone call. “You can get the money tomorrow and pay for the basement.”

“So what’s happened at those two flats?”

“The bloke who said his genitals were gnawed by rats... he’s registered at a psychiatric clinic. I’ve got a certificate. At the other flat, the girl’s bed creaked and she was telling her mother: ‘Must be rats.’ If only you’d seen her arse... you wouldn’t have slept a wink.”

Then I dropped off. Right there in the basement. The basement we had rented as an office, struggling as we were to make ends meet on small orders.

*For millions of years brown and black rats teemed synanthropical-ly in the rice paddies of China, blocked in by the Himalayas, deserts, jungles and ice, in the vile place from which they finally came to us, horde after horde.*

*As human beings migrated in search of gold, the glaciers melted away and opened up passes, and... with one bound the hordes broke out! They skirted round the Himalayas and headed north, to Korea and Manchuria, and pushed south, towards the allure of India. The East rolled over without even lifting its head*

*up. The first creature to come and congratulate the Buddha on the New Year was a rat – and this rat was actually worshipped as a symbol of joy and prosperity!*

*Europe suffered grievously from the twelfth century onwards, and struggled to come to terms with the problem – after all, no rats were thought to have lived in Golden Hellas... But in fact black rats, the inhabitants of ships and garrets, had oppressed Ancient Egypt to such a degree that the killing of a cat, even if accidental, was punishable by death. As for our beloved Ancient Greece and Rome, they were saved by one thing – no mention of rats. They called them all “mice”... to think that we admired their cleanliness – idiots! But excavations have made clear precisely what kind of creature Aristotle was describing: “It is conceived and born from the dirt on board ship, it is engendered through the licking of salt.” This was the creature that Diogenes upbraided for its carnal appetites, that Cicero blamed for chewing up his sandals.*

*The gods – including Apollo, the god of these “mice” – destroyed the Titans so totally that the giants lurched, fell over and the earth cracked. It was then that these creatures, the rats, came spouting out of the dark cracks – shlop, shlop, shlop.*

*And they surrounded the human race.*

*“The mountain has brought forth a mouse.” What a devilish ploy: the most wretched piece of news is rinsed clean with a meaningless proverb, with no indication as to what the mountain and the mouse really are.*

There are no windows in the basement. The darkness comes to an end when Oldie turns the light on. He pokes the key into the lock, picking up from the floor the sign that has fallen off the door: “RAT Co-op”. I didn’t get a good night’s sleep. Oldie, the bastard... couldn’t he have dragged himself along a little later?

*Everybody gets his deserts. The bloke who brought the apples of paradise for his beloved ended up seeing claws sink into her fair white neck. So in the trail of their black relatives followed the brown rats – the triumphant victors! They strode along with the Arabs into the Gulf of Persia, across the Red Sea, while the Crusaders carried them further beyond Palestine, and together with pearls and spices the vessels of Venice delivered plague-riddled rats to Europe. In the fifteenth century the Church put a curse on them. But it was too late. The bones of a brown rat were dug up in the palace of the Shirvanshah in Baku.*

*The brown rats began to gnaw at old Russia. The convicts of the Solovki Monastery paid with their ears and noses for the free trade in Pskov and Novgorod, when the rats arrived with Peter the Great. In 1727 an earthquake in the Karakum Desert hurled a whole mass of brown rats at Astrakhan: the pincers were closing in.*

*In 1732 England got its retribution with a vessel from East India.*

*In 1753 Paris yielded, and seventeen years later the paupers were gobbling up rats during the Siege of Paris. The meat tasted like coypu.*

*In 1775 America capitulated.*

*In 1780, Germany.*

*When Russians arrived in the Aleutian Islands, the place was teeming with rats, so they called them the “Rat Islands”.*

*In 1809 Switzerland fell.*

Oldie walks around sneezing, the bastard. He sticks a carton of milk and a small loaf under my nose, and rummages about for something else in his bag. He’s the boss, so he takes the table. I have a folding bed and sleep with my legs drawn up.

\* \* \*

*The rats moved on: they marked the end of the nineteenth century by taking Tyumen, Tobolsk, Yevpatoriya. The Russo-Japanese War rewarded them with Omsk and Tomsk, and by 1912 they had occupied the Trans-Siberian Railway.*

*The First World War kept rats, both black and brown, well fed with human flesh: Europe was vanquished. The Second World War glorified the rats' victories on the Volkhov Front and in besieged Leningrad: they warmed themselves in children's beds and inhabited the front lines of the defence. The evacuation carried them in all directions. In 1943 the brown rat entered Frunze by train.*

“That’s enough jerking your legs about,” says Oldie, “enough sleeping. I’ve paid for the basement!”

*I used to laugh in my cradle at my mother’s funny words. Soviet Muslims learnt to eat pork: they received pig farms and everything else into the bargain. To the last pure places the rats were transported by goods trains, virgin-land labourers, along the Georgian Military Highway, in the Baltic hay conveyed to the Volga Region, Canadian wheat to Yakutia, potatoes from Northern Kazakhstan to Almaty. Everything.*

*From the fifteen-hundred-metre heights of the Carpathians to the submarines at Vladivostok – one word the world over: rats.*

*When a person devotes himself to one thing, he succeeds. But with this “one thing” he acquires something else. The “one thing” is of various kinds, but the end result is the same: it has ears and an icicle-like tail. I grew up when the rats were already in my home town.*

\* \* \*

I made a hole in the milk carton and nibbled at the loaf.

A grey-haired, thickset man in a business suit dropped in on us, scratching his neck as he walked, and fished a classified newspaper out of his jacket.

“Look, here’s...”

It was me who’d put the ad in:

*Annihilation of Rats in any Region of the Earth*

*Unparalleled opportunity. Prices lower than the international competition. We have rid the Vendôme Islands, Thüringen and the public toilets in Geneva (three hundred sitting places!) of rats. Laureate of the Swedish Academy – the “RAT Co-op”!*

*How to get there: Medvedkovo Underground Station, then bus No. 661 to the Municipal Vocational School stop. Cross over and go along the concrete wall to the gap. Cross to the motor depot of the flour mill. Ask for the building of the Society for the Blind. It’s the first entrance in the basement, sixth door to the left. Tel. 431-60-31, from 10 p.m. to midnight. Ask for Vladimir or Larisa.*

“That’s all correct,” said Oldie. “Draw up a chair.”

The man’s eyes fell on the vests and socks spread out over the radiator, and he looked at my swollen face.

Oldie introduced himself: “Master of Sciences, and senior scientific-research fellow at the Zoopsychological Laboratory of Moscow University. And this is a graduate student of the Severtsev Institute of Evolutionary Morphology.”

On hearing these unknown words the fellow took a seat and said in plain terms: “You can make a fortune, my friend.”

“We could – if we’ve got time,” I responded. “We got back

yesterday from Stockholm. Next week, Lisbon. We neck a beer, and we're on the move again." I got up. "What kind of building is it? You're not paying in foreign currency, by any chance?"

The fellow spread a map out over the table. Oldie rested his elbows on it, scenting loot.

"Svetloyar Town – formerly known as Yagoda – in the Tambov Region. I'm the big cheese, the Mayor." He scratched his knee. "There's a hotel there, The Don, twenty-five storeys, with a cinema-concert hall – that'll be your job."

"The Don?" repeated Oldie.

"We've renamed the hotel. In honour of a certain event... You see, on the twelfth of September we're having a ceremonial unveiling of the source of the River Don."

Oldie ran his finger over the map.

"So that's where it is?"

The fellow sighed deeply, his low forehead wrinkling.

"This is not for the press, absolutely not. But there's an idea knocking about in Moscow of linking us to the 'Golden Ring', where they take foreign tourists: an old town where the Don starts, the struggle for liberty, a historic river and all that kind of stuff. We didn't even know about this project – we're not that old... a new build from Stalin's time. But our deputy to the Supreme Soviet is on the Committee for Culture. And he's arranged this whole thing. It'd be good to have foreigners around: we've got this distillery. So we've got on with it. The problem is, not even scientists know where the real source is – three different regions are quarrelling over it... We're laying a pipe to the Don – *that* will be the source... We got burial mounds from the Ukraine, from the Black Sea region... demonstration digs, swords collected from museums..."

"What about the name?"

"We've invited some historians, and we're feeding the idea to

the press that Yagoda wasn't named after Stalin's executioner after all, but was founded by Prince Yury Dolgoruky, on the spot where a nun he knew lived, or in a place where the yagé plant grew."

"You've got yagé plants there?" I said, amused.

The fellow gave a further sigh.

"We're transplanting them, from the Tropics. That's my job. Our deputy overdid it a bit, he declared at the Ministry of Culture that we're unveiling this source, and inaugurating the festival, the town's thousandth anniversary, which just happens to coincide with the visit of the UN Secretary General. So now this Asian fellow is coming. And our own President. The television will be there too and... they'll have my blood. The rat situation is just awful – it's a meat-processing plant, you understand. We need this hall. Your job will be only the hotel's banquet hall. Will you do it?" He scratched his cheek, and we exchanged glances. "My name's Ivan Trofimovich. I won't be watching the pennies."

He touched his briefcase, and I sidled off for glasses.

"Well, in that case there's very little time left. So, well then... for this rush job, plus the hall, basement, loft, communication passageways, lawns, every storey and lifts..." Ivan Trofimovich opened the vodka bottle, Oldie totted up figures on a paper napkin, and I blurted out: "Sixteen thousand four hundred US dollars. Plus board and lodging."

Everybody was stunned. All three of us froze and listened to the prolonged rumbling in my belly. It was time to sleep, and we hadn't eaten yet.

"No. Far too expensive." The chap got up and mumbled through colourless lips. "I'll go to the State Health Service."

"You can try." I pushed Oldie's hand, which jerked to erase a zero from the declared figure. "They'll say: 'We don't have enough staff or poison.' You won't clean up a building like that in two

weeks, not for any money. You'll just lose another day. And then we won't be able to take up the job any more. If you're itching from rat-borne ticks, it's obvious that in your town you must have tularaemia and leptospirosis. Just imagine if some idiot writes to the State Health Inspector, or straight to the President?"

I rinsed my mouth with some milk.

Oldie took the scowling Mayor by the arm.

"Ivan Trofimovich," he whispered under the man's hat, as if addressing a child, "who's gonna help you? Nobody's gonna help you. You'll get mixed up with a bunch of con men, you'll sign a contract for 98% rat extermination. They'll show you five dead ones and off they'll go. And the rest of the population? It'll still be there. In another month they'll be jumping all over your jacket. But we can *really* exterminate them – get them down to virtually zero. We're the best in the country – ask anybody. They'll whack up a bust of you in your neighbourhood."

"There's one already." And the fellow crumpled.

We drained our glasses.

"If you like," exclaimed Oldie, "we'll clean the whole town out. Within three months! What if the UN guy wants to visit your bathhouse?!"

"They don't bathe, I reckon. They sent me his picture – looks like a gypsy. The town is to be cleaned by the locals, with folk remedies. We've got this new cooperative, 'Rat King' – that's the name."

I burst out laughing: "And why can't *they* sort the hotel out?"

Oldie, handing a glass over to the chap, shoved his elbow into my nose.

The Mayor of Svetloyar answered firmly:

"They won't take on the hotel. Nobody will. Before you, I went round to see everybody, both the private cooperatives and state institutions. Everybody refused. A dead end."

"Why?" I asked cautiously.

“My friend – it’s a real mess. We’ve got used to the rats, they’ve become established. We just scatter some sausages in our basements and they stay down there. Everyone feeds his own rats in his own house. But in the hotel – they actually tumble down from the ceiling. And run into chinks in the wall. Even by day. Right onto the table. Even onto your head. It’s happened to me – on my head.” He took off his hat. “A baby rat. Right there.” His eyes glittered tearfully. “We don’t need them reduced to your ‘virtual zero’. Let them run around. As long as they don’t come falling down on just that one day!”

“Do they fall from the upper storey?” Oldie wanted to make sure.

“There *are* no more storeys above the banquet hall!”

“Do they get onto the roof from the basement?”

“There aren’t any in the basement either. The hotel’s the cleanest place in the town. They only fall from the ceiling. And you’re trying to fleece me for treating each floor?”

“We’ll find them on every floor if they’re falling down. You’re simply not seeing them,” snarled Oldie, and he winked at me – but I was lost in thought.

Oldie poked around in the table for blank contract forms, and on his lips swelled the golden word “advance”. Meanwhile, with a light heart I went out into the yard and lay down on a bench under the apple tree with a white-washed trunk. Admiring the iron-plated door of the “Used Glassware” establishment I breathed in the last of August – summer was over.

“I’m telling you; they’re only to the south of Lenin Street. Where the authorities live, and where the office buildings are. Why don’t they go north, into people’s houses?” Ivan Trofimovich stood over my head in front of the road as if praying.

“That’s typical. Pallas – there was a scientist of that name – journeyed around Russia in the eighteenth century, and also